Evgeniy Devyatkin

GORKY-17:
Operation O.D.I.U.M.

Based on the video game Gorky-17

Gorky-17: OPERATION “O.D.I.U.M.”
Author: Evgeny Devyatkin

Acknowledgments: to my friend Arnold and my wife Ksenia

Warning: the text contains abnormal language and explicit scenes of violence 18+

Preface from the author:

I first played Gorky-17 back in 2001 - and the game impressed me forever. Dark, oppressive atmosphere, intriguing plot, grotesque monsters that gave me goosebumps... All this made me fall in love with the game from the very first seconds.

Years passed, but Gorky-17 didn't let go. I decided to rethink the story of the game - but not just to retell it, but to reassemble it anew. I delved into the lore, reworked the backstory, and added new characters and conflicts to give the events more wholeness and drama.

This is not a literature walkthrough. Many storylines, character motivations, and even the very nature of the disaster itself have been rewritten. What you see before you is an alternative version of the Gorky-17 universe, a literary remake of sorts, where familiar elements are woven into a new story.

I hope you will like it.

CHAPTER 1 - PROLOGUE
SOMEWHERE IN POLAND. OCTOBER 18, 2035

Run. Don’t slow down. Don’t look back. Never look back.

Joan McFadden sprinted through the nightmare, her boots nearly tripping over the debris scattered across the asphalt. Somewhere behind her, in the pitch-black void between the buildings, it was hunting her—invisible, intangible, but deadly. The empty windows of the five-story buildings gaped like the eye sockets of skulls. Shadows shifted in their depths—Joan knew it was just a trick of the light, but her skin prickled with goosebumps anyway.

Leif’s face flashed before her eyes again—his expression twisted in terror, his skin veined with black tendrils, his fingers clawing at his own throat until his nails tore through flesh—

"Don’t think. Run!"

She ducked into a narrow alley. Graffiti-covered walls closed in overhead, turning the path into a tunnel. Behind her, metal screeched—something heavy had landed on a car roof.

"They jump. Like spiders. God, how they jump..."

Her heart hammered so violently it felt like it would crack her ribs. Joan stumbled into a courtyard, her feet tangling in scattered trash, and pressed herself against a wall covered in a massive mural—a grotesque, two-meter-tall demon in a Sepultura T-shirt, baring its fangs. For a second, she thought it moved.

"Breathe. In. Out. In. Out."

She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting the panic.

Joan leaned against the cold concrete, her trembling fingers gripping the pistol.

Her red hair, once tied in a tight ponytail, now clung to her skin, slick with sweat. Her face—pale, with sharp cheekbones and thin lips pressed into a tight line. Her eyes—green, but now almost gray with fear. Her uniform—smeared with dirt and blood. The lightweight polymer vest creaked with every movement. The red cross patch on her arm—faded but proud. The last symbol of humanity in this hell. The medkit bag on her belt.

She was a field medic. The best. She had stitched up wounds under gunfire, revived soldiers who no longer had faces.

But today... today, she had been powerless.

Footsteps. Close.

They were following her. How many? A few? A dozen? She couldn't tell—the sound scattered like echoes in a tunnel. Sometimes dull thuds on the asphalt, sometimes claws scraping against iron doors, sometimes the thump of something leaping onto car roofs. Closer. Closer.

Joan froze.

"In through the nose. Out through the mouth."

But her breath wouldn't obey. Her heart pounded wildly, as if trying to burst from her chest.

Crouching behind a dumpster, she pressed herself into the wall, willing herself to disappear. Her heartbeat was so loud she was sure it could be heard for miles.

It entered the courtyard.

A two-meter shadow moved unnaturally—not in steps, but slithering from one patch of darkness to another. The air filled with the stench of wet fur.

Joan clenched her eyes shut. A question burned in her mind: where to aim the gun? At it? Or at her own temple? She wasn't afraid of death. She was afraid that in her last moment, madness would consume her—just like it had consumed Leif.

The creature slowed near a shattered mirror. A crunch—it bent down, examining its reflection. Through the gap between the dumpsters, Joan saw:

Skin covered in pulsating blisters.
Fingers too long, tipped with claws that scratched at its own face.
Something like a mouth—splitting open vertically.

Her fingers tightened around the pistol on their own. But then her gaze caught a saving detail—a half-open gate leading to the next courtyard. Just fifteen meters. One sprint...

At that moment, gunfire erupted nearby.

"Kristensen!" The thought flashed like a lifeline. The creature howled and bolted away, leaving behind a foul stench.

Without thinking, Joan dashed for the gate. Her legs threatened to buckle, but fear lent her strength. The construction site greeted her with eerie silence: frozen excavators with buckets full of dirt, piles of rusted pipes stacked into grotesque sculptures.

And most importantly—no sign of people. Where had the shooter gone?

"Joan!" A hoarse whisper cut through the dark.

She flinched, nearly dropping her pistol, before recognizing the gaunt face of Captain Nils Kristensen. A battle-hardened soldier with a weather-beaten face—rough features, a nose broken in several places, stiff stubble. Eyes accustomed to danger now frantically scan the space, betraying the fear he is desperately trying to suppress. He is scared. Really scared. But he does not allow himself to tremble.

"Nils! I thought—" Her voice cracked.

"Quiet!" He grabbed her shoulder, fingers digging into her uniform. "To the sewers. Now."

The manhole was buried under trash. Nils, growling through clenched teeth, kicked aside a rusted tire.

"Check what's down there." His voice was ragged, on the verge of breaking. He covered her, his rifle sweeping from rooftops to doorways. Silence. Too quiet... His scope caught a dirty doll in a broken window. He's felt a chill crawl down his spine.

"Clear! Nobody!" Joan exhaled—then tensed again.

He spun around and shoved a battered folder into her hands:

"Keep this. At any cost."

Documents. The only proof. Joan crammed the folder into her backpack, her fingers shaking.

"Now—down! I'll be right behind—"

She didn't notice his gaze lingering on something behind her.

The thing you can't see... until it's too late.

Joan was already climbing down the rusted ladder when the air behind Kristensen rippled—like heat over scorched asphalt. He realized.

"McFadden, go! Don't wait!" His shout was so sharp she instinctively jerked back.

"Close the hatch!" He lunged forward—but invisible claws already sank into his shoulders, yanking him back.

The manhole cover slammed shut. Gunfire. The crunch of bones. The sound of tearing flesh.

Joan pressed against the damp sewer wall, biting her fist to keep from screaming. A ringing filled her ears.

"At... any cost..."

A metallic screech against concrete made her flinch. That grating, unnatural sound—like nails on a chalkboard—snapped her back to reality. Her hand flew to the pistol on her thigh, fingers wrapping around the grip. Three deep breaths—in through the nose, out through the mouth, just like survival training had taught her.

"Not now, goddammit, not now—"

In the gloom to her left, a rust-streaked metal door stood ajar. Joan sprinted toward it, assessing: hinges rotten, lock jammed, but kickable. She swung her leg—the steel-toed boot struck just below the lock. With a crack, the door gave way, revealing a narrow passage.

"Pull yourself together, Joan!" she screamed inwardly, squeezing through. "The tunnels lead to the bomb shelter. You can hold out till backup arrives."

The long corridor reeked of stagnant water and something sharper—maybe rotting corpses. Joan pressed her collar to her nose, but it barely helped. Pipes lined the walls, covered in strange, slimy growths.

Halfway through, a deep gurgle came from the right—a pipe bulged like an overstuffed intestine. Joan barely dodged as the rusted metal burst, spewing scalding steam. The burning wave hit her face.

"Shit! Shit! SHIT!"

She rolled across the wet floor, tears blurring her vision from the pain. When her sight cleared, a new problem stood before her—the corridor was now blocked by a wall of hissing vapor.

Behind her, the scraping grew louder. Closer.

With shaking hands, Joan grabbed the next door. Locked. Two precise shots—the lock shattered.

The tunnel beyond was even narrower, its low ceiling forcing her to hunch over. The water underfoot was unnaturally thick, as if mixed with something viscous.

Finally reaching a drainage chamber, Joan straightened up. The air here was slightly cleaner—old filtration systems still worked, scrubbing out the worst toxins. She collapsed onto a platform, her muscles trembling with exhaustion.

"Damn shelter... Damn Dublin... Damn choice..."

Her thoughts raced, clinging to the past—anything to avoid thinking about what might be lurking behind her now.

Memories flashed before her eyes.
St. Bridget’s Orphanage.

"You’re tough, Joann. You’ll survive." — Sister Mary’s words when, at twelve years old, she fought off the older boys to keep her dinner. That was the first time she understood: the world only gives to those who take.

"And now... I’ll survive."

Her fingers trembled as she reloaded her pistol on the move.

Army days.
"Medical Corps? Seriously?" — The instructor had laughed, eyeing her scrawny frame. A year later, that same mustached bastard knelt before her when she dragged his platoon out of a firefight under heavy gunfire.

"I saved them from bullets... And now I have to save myself from this?!"

Something fell in the darkness with a wet slap.

The first death. Her mother’s hand, clenched in hers.
"I swore then... Never to lose anyone again."

And now Leif and Trotty... Their screams still rang in her ears.

"But how do you fight something you don’t understand?!"

She jerked to a stop, pressing against the damp wall. Her heart hammered so hard it felt like it would crack her ribs.

"Pull yourself together, MacFadden. You’re not that orphanage girl anymore. You’re not that medic who flinched at blood. You’re—"

A rustling sound came from the darkness.

"—the only one left."

Her fingers tightened around the pistol.

Her right cheek burned—skin reddened, but the burn seemed shallow. She wiped sweat and grime from her face with her palm, then checked her weapon: three rounds in the chamber, two full mags on her belt.

On the opposite wall, something white flickered. Her flashlight cut through the darkness, revealing a tattered utility map. Joann stepped closer, scraping layers of grime off the plastic coating.

"Okay... So I’m here..."

Her finger shook as she traced the route. She’d strayed off course, but not critically. The main tunnel, fifty meters ahead, should lead straight to—

A new sound made her whirl around. This time—a wet, sloshing step somewhere behind her. Closer than the scraping had been. Much closer.

"Don’t look into the dark. Don’t stare. Something might stare back."

Water sloshed under her boots, icy dampness seeping through the rubberized fabric. Emergency lights, sparse as stars on a rainy night, flickered, casting pulsing shadows on the walls. And everywhere—marks. Deep gouges, as if something massive had forced its way through these narrow passages. The metal was scraped bare at human height.

"An alligator?" The thought flashed, and Joann immediately cursed herself for the stupidity. "In Polish sewers?"

The growl came suddenly, freezing her blood. It wasn’t a sound—it was a perversion of nature, like a reptile’s cry fed through a synthesizer and mixed with the buzz of high-voltage wires. It came from everywhere at once, echoing off pipes, swelling into a nightmarish cacophony.

A shadow darted ahead—huge, shapeless, momentarily blotting out a distant light. Joann pressed against a column, cold sweat trickling down her spine. Her fingers found a rusted door handle.

The door resisted, as if fused to the frame. She threw her weight against it, feeling the hinges screech, crumble—then finally give way. She squeezed through the gap just as something heavy slapped into the water behind her.

The boiler room greeted her with tomb-like silence. The darkness here was absolute, a tangible thing. Her flashlight revealed only the nearest pipes, coated in thick, glistening slime.

"Not far now," Joann told herself.

Then something small and fast sank its teeth into her leg.

Pain came instantly—sharp, burning, wrenching a scream from her more from shock than agony. Her leg jerked instinctively, and the darkness erupted with a shriek as the creature slammed into a boiler.

Her flashlight caught a fleeting silhouette—something between a rat and a lizard, all claws and lashing tail. A bullet punched into concrete, showering them both in fragments. The second shot found its mark—a wet pop, and the darkness swallowed everything again.

Her ankle burned like fire. Joann probed the hole in her boot—the fangs had pierced even the Kevlar lining. The auto-injector hissed, flooding her veins with painkillers. The cold numbness spread, dulling the pain but not the fear.

"Don’t look at the wound. Don’t think about infection. Get to safety—then you can fall apart."

"Three steps. Another three. You’ve survived worse. That day in Syria... At the orphanage, when—"
A fresh wave of pain yanked her back to reality.

Joann gritted her teeth, reloading with shaking hands. The rounds stuck—her fingers slippery with blood and sweat.

"Move... Just move."

Leaning against the cold concrete wall, she limped toward a faint glow at the tunnel's end.

Even her own breathing sounded deafening. Joann froze by a vent grate, pressing her back to the wall.

Her heart pounded wildly.

Then she heard IT—a wet, rasping panting on the other side of the grate. Something big. Something hungry.

The grate exploded outward with a metallic shriek. Claws—not hands, no, something bony and crusted with growths—shot from the black vent shaft, sinking into her shoulder, tearing fabric and flesh.

"NO!" Her scream echoed through the tunnels.

Her pistol fired blind—the bullet ricocheted off the ceiling in a shower of sparks. The creature roared, a sound ripped from nightmares—guttural, bubbling, vibrating in her bones.

She felt herself being dragged toward the vent's black maw. Her legs kicked uselessly against the metal walls, claws raked her face—warm blood blinded her right eye. A ringing filled her ears, mixing with her own screams, the creature's rancid breath scalding her skin.

Gunshots. One. Two. Three.

Muffled by the cramped space. The beast howled—a sound to freeze blood.

Silence.

Only the drip of her blood on metal. Somewhere, water trickled. Then—footsteps.
Not hers. Not human.

CHAPTER 2 – The Leader, The berserker, and the scientist

One Week Later
Toronto, Canada. Early morning.

Cole Sullivan woke when the bottle slipped from his grip and shattered on the floor. Sticky whiskey seeped into the floorboards, mixing with dust and glass. He didn't bother cleaning it up. Why bother? No one was coming.

On the TV in the next room, a reporter droned:
"—new outbreaks in Eastern Europe. Death toll from the 'Dexter Virus' exceeds 15,000. The Hague trials for 'New Earth' leaders continue today—"

Flashback. 2030. Evening.

He stood in the hospital doorway, clutching the paper. "Code 451. Viral pneumonia. Prognosis: terminal."
"It's just the flu!" he'd nearly shouted. "What the hell?!"
The doctor, a tired man in a hazmat suit, just shook his head.
"It was just the flu. Now it's a death sentence."

Cole hadn’t believed it. Couldn’t. But three days later, his wife Sarah suffocated in ICU.
A week after that—his son Jacob.

Flashback. News footage, 2030.
The TV screen flickered in the dark, empty house.
"—terror group 'New Earth' claims responsibility for attacks in major cities. UN reports indicate an engineered pathogen—"
The footage cut to masked figures, burning labs, corpses in hospital hallways.
"—the virus interacts with common respiratory infections, rendering them lethal. Mortality rate: 60%—"
Cole turned it off.

He returned to the present, pressing his palms to his temples as if to crush the pounding—hangover, exhaustion, self-loathing all mixed into one.

His black hair, once neatly military-short, stuck up in disarray. His face—weathered, sharp-angled, lined deeper than a forty-year-old’s should be.

But the scar stood out most.

A jagged white slash from cheek to jaw—a souvenir from the North Caucasus, a piece of the past he couldn’t carve out. Sometimes, in rare sober moments, he caught himself tracing it, as if he could erase it. But scars, like memories, don’t fade.

He wasn’t a soldier anymore. Not a hero. Just an empty shell.

Five years. Five years since the world changed. Five years since "New Earth" released that cursed virus.

They called themselves "the planet’s cure." Said humanity was the disease.

Their leader, a man calling himself Dr. Emil Dexter, declared in his manifesto:
"We don’t kill people. We merely... accelerate natural selection."

Natural selection.

Cole clenched his fists. His family hadn’t been "weak." They’d just lived. And now they were gone.

And the world?

The world was crumbling. The virus mutated faster than vaccines could be made. Every year—new outbreaks. Every month—more deaths.

Humanity was dying. And Cole?

Cole just existed. Days blurred into an alcoholic haze. Nightmares. Empty bottles.

Until today.

He reached for another drink but knocked over a framed photo instead. Them. His wife—smiling, sunlight in her chestnut hair. His son—eight years old, gap-toothed, wearing a Blue Jays cap. Cole flipped the photo facedown.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

His phone vibrated. He ignored it. His head throbbed like a grenade was detonating inside it.

Fifth ring. He snatched it up.
"What?!"
"Sullivan. It's Lamar."
General Lamar's voice was crisp, emotionless. Cole froze.
"I'm retired, sir."
"I know. But I need you."
"Not interested. Not a soldier anymore."
"You gonna rot here till you die?"
Silence. Cole stared at the photo.
"Not here to beg. There's a mission. You're in or you're not. Your call."
"What mission?"
"Not over the phone. Car's en route. Twenty minutes."
Cole wanted to hang up. But—
"Why me?"
A pause.
"Because you're one of the few who survived the North Caucasus shitshow. Because you don't give a damn about rules. And because—"
Another pause. The general exhaled.
"If not you, then who?"

Cole looked at the empty bottle. Then the photo.
"Fine."

He tossed the phone on the bed. Stood. Walked to the window. Behind him—an empty house. An empty life.

Ahead—a fight with the unknown.

A black SUV idled at the curb.

Poland. Gorzów. "Grizzly" Bar.
"Life's like wading through a swamp—every step's a bitch." The phrase looped in Jarek Ovitz's head as he downed another shot late at night.

The bar was packed—cigarette smoke, shouting, distorted rock blaring from speakers. Jarek sat at the counter, surrounded by his boys—fellow retired "wolves" like himself. They were celebrating a clean job: wiping out mercs who'd tried hijacking a military shipment. No loose ends meant they could drink themselves stupid.

His sun-bleached hair stuck up in uneven tufts. A scar above his right eyebrow—pale, jagged, from a shard or a knuckle decades ago—stood out against his tan. His blue eyes, usually cold as a winter field, now glinted with drunken fire.

His body was lean, wiry—working-man's strength, honed in village brawls, then army barracks, then freelance work. His hands were scratched, nails chipped, like he was always fixing—or breaking—something. Even in a battered leather jacket and stretched sweater, he looked tough as old timber.

Pale scars were visible under his sweater—traces of implants. They glimmered slightly on his wrists and collarbones, as if to remind him that beneath this skin was not just flesh, but a weapon.

His voice was rough, a mix of cigarettes and cheap liquor. He spoke loud, laced with crude humor, but every word carried sharp wit. A linguist, damn it. Could quote Mickiewicz between bar fights, then crack a joke about a sergeant and a nurse.

Jarek was already wasted—vodka, whiskey, beer—all swirling into a hot fog. Nearby, a girl with garish red hair and cheap lipstick giggled, eyeing her boyfriend—a hulking brute with a crooked nose and a snake tattoo.

"Hey, gorgeous!" Jarek staggered over. "You special forces? 'Cause you just blew my cover."

She smirked. Her boyfriend stood, knocking the table.
"Back off, asshole," he growled, shoving Jarek.

A punch to the nose—sharp, precise. Cartilage crunched. Blood sprayed the table. The man dropped. His three friends surged up.

"Oops. Reflex." Jarek grinned.

The first—a stocky skinhead—swung. Jarek grabbed a bottle and smashed it across his temple. Glass shattered. The man collapsed, gurgling.

The second—lanky, with a brow piercing—lunged from behind. Jarek spun, grabbed his collar, and hurled him through the window. Glass exploded. The man tumbled outside, howling.

The third—biggest of all—wound up a punch. Jarek caught his arm, yanked him forward, and slammed his face into the bar. Once. Twice. The man slumped, unconscious.

"Anyone else wanna teach me manners?" Jarek wiped his hands, scanning the room.

The bartender—a grizzled bear of a man—sighed.
"Goddammit, Ovitz."
"Relax, old man." Jarek slapped a wad of cash on the counter. "I'll cover it."

He drained his whiskey, exhaled sharply, and swayed toward the exit.

Cold air hit his face. He lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. His head buzzed, but he was still standing.

"Mr. Ovitz."

A dry, emotionless voice. A man in a UN uniform stepped from the shadows—lean, buzz-cut, sniper's eyes.

"Oh, another volunteer?" Jarek swayed but steadied himself.

"Your skills are... impressive," the man said, ignoring the jab. "We have an offer. A mission. Classified."

Jarek snorted, blowing a smoke ring.
"I'm retired. And drunk."
"We know. But you speak Russian, Ukrainian, five other languages. And your... unique experience."
"Yeah, unique," Jarek smirked. "So you need a guy who can shoot and swear in six languages?"

The soldier didn't smile.

Jarek flicked his cigarette.
"Fine. Where's my helicopter?" He laughed, but the drunken glint was gone from his eyes.
"The car's waiting, Mr. Ovitz."

Jarek hesitated. Then spat, lit another cigarette, and waved lazily at his stunned buddies in the bar.

"Guess the game's on."

France. Nantes. Closed Laboratory of "Onirique Industries."

The dim neon lights flickered under the ceiling of the laboratory, their reflections dancing in glass flasks filled with murky solutions. The air reeked of sterilizing agents and the acrid aftertaste of chemicals—like someone had mixed bleach with burnt plastic. At the center of the room stood a massive sealed chamber of reinforced glass and steel, inside which pale yellow smoke still swirled.

"Decontamination complete," a mechanical voice announced from the speakers.

The chamber door hissed open, releasing a figure in a bulky protective suit that looked more like a spacesuit than anything else. His movements were slow, as if fighting against zero gravity. Scientists in white lab coats immediately swarmed him, unscrewing bolts, removing gloves, checking sensors.

When the helmet finally came off, it revealed a gaunt face with sharp cheekbones and pale, sweat-slicked skin. Thiery Trantigne, 30, one of the lead biochemists at the facility. His head was completely shaved—not for aesthetics, but due to strict safety protocols. His gray-blue eyes, weary and strained, instantly squinted against the harsh light.

"J-Just a moment, Jeanne," he stammered, nervously running a hand over his face as if checking if his features were still intact. *"We need to log the data. P-Phase three was successful. Gas neutralization at 98.7%. Repeat tests tomorrow."*

The woman with a tight brown braid nodded, hastily typing into her tablet. Thiery took a deep breath.

He shed the suit, now standing in a sweat-drenched gray jumpsuit, and pulled a pair of round, thin-framed glasses from his pocket. Putting them on instantly made him look more composed—as if the glasses were his shield against the outside world.

Thiery headed for the emergency exit—a narrow metal door at the end of the hallway. He had promised himself he'd quit smoking after his father's death. Lung cancer. Six years ago. But stress had a way of breaking promises.

The cold evening air hit his face as he pushed the door open. The rooftop of the lab building was deserted—just ventilation shafts and a few perimeter floodlights. Thiery pulled out a crumpled pack of Gitanes and froze, staring at it.

"Promises are just words, right?" he muttered to himself, lighting a cigarette.

The smoke burned his lungs, but he inhaled deeper, closing his eyes. For a second, he could almost see his father again—the same thin, balding man in glasses, coughing up blood in a hospital bed.

"Congratulations on your success, Doctor."

A low voice with a slight accent came from behind him.

Thiery spun around. In the doorway stood a tall man in a UN officer's uniform, though a white lab coat was draped over it—as if he'd just stepped out of surgery. His face was shadowed, but Thiery caught the glint of cold gray eyes and a scar running through one eyebrow.

"C-Can I ask who you are?" Thiery tried to hide his nerves, but his fingers instinctively went to his earlobe.

The stranger stepped forward, and the floodlight illuminated the badge on his chest—a black shield with the acronym "UNSOG" (United Nations Special Operations Group).

"Captain Reyes," he introduced himself. "Got a light?"

Thiery silently handed over the pack. Reyes deftly took a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag.

"Impressive work. Your formula neutralizes the gas in minutes. Even the Americans haven't managed that."

Thiery said nothing. Compliments always unsettled him.

"But I'm here for a different reason." Reyes pulled out a tablet and turned it on. A map of Poland flashed on the screen, marked with "Gorky-17." "You've been assigned to a special ops team. Mission is top priority."

A cold sweat trickled down Thiery's spine.

"I'm… I'm not a soldier. I'm a scientist."

"Exactly why we need you," Reyes smirked. "There's something there that requires your… expertise."

He handed Thiery a black badge stamped with "B-07."

"Your colleagues have already been informed. Your flight leaves in three hours."

Thiery froze. He knew this wasn't a request.

"What if I refuse?"

Reyes slowly crushed his cigarette under his boot.

"You did read your contract with Onirique, didn't you, Doctor?" His voice grew quieter, harder. *"Section 17-B. 'Scientific personnel may be mobilized in the event of a global threat.' And what's in Gorky-17…"* He paused. "That's the threat."

Thiery clenched the badge in his fist.

"What's happening there?"

Reyes turned to leave but threw one last line over his shoulder:

"The end of the world, Doctor. And it's your choice—help stop it… or become part of it."

The door slammed shut. Thiery stood alone, staring at the crushed cigarette in his hand. He flicked it over the railing and crumpled the pack in his fist.

Promises could wait.

"Walter" Military Base. Poland-Germany Border.
Noon. The sun scorched mercilessly, turning the asphalt into a griddle. Recruits marched along the perimeter, their boots thudding in sync with the sergeant's commands. Somewhere in the distance, the engines of armored vehicles roared, prepping for drills.

The growl of an engine. A black military van with tinted windows rolled onto the base, kicking up dust. Two armed escort jeeps followed like shadows.

The door opened. Cole Sullivan stepped out. He stood for a second, squinting against the sun, then lit a cigarette and exhaled slowly, scanning the barracks, hangars, and barbed wire fences.

"Like nothing's changed."

Except he had.

Cole strode toward the command building—a massive concrete block with NATO's flag at the entrance. The guards recognized him instantly—by his stance, his gaze, the way he carried himself like he was still ready for a firefight. They saluted. He didn't return it.

The corridors of HQ. Cool air. The smell of coffee, gunpowder, and metal.

Cole's heavy boots thudded against the linoleum as he walked. Portraits of generals, operation maps, and photos of "heroes" lined the walls. He didn't look at them. The door at the end. He pushed it open with his shoulder and entered.

Briefing room. Cool semi-darkness. A large screen. A table covered in maps.

Thiery Trantigne couldn't take his eyes off Sullivan. He'd heard of him—not just rumors, but a dossier he'd glimpsed as a UN consultant. Major Cole Sullivan. Former special forces. Countless ops. Medals too

many to list. A brilliant tactician, cold, calculating. But five years ago, he resigned. After "New Earth" killed his family.

Aside from them, there were other soldiers in the room:
Anton Wazowski, a stubby medic with a ragged first aid kit and a tired look in his eyes.

Seamus Tartakovski, a surly gunner with “GROM” tattooed on his forearm. A veteran who smoked too much and talked too little.

Mark Novak, a bearded machine gunner who looked like a bear in body armor.

General Lamar was preparing for a briefing.

The silence was shattered by Jarek Ovitz, slouched in his chair like this was a bar, not a "Black Phoenix" threat-level briefing.

"So, why are we here? Some rich brat get snatched by Somalians?"

His voice echoed, and Mark Novak, a massive bearded man, snorted into his palm. Cole’s lip barely twitched. He knew Ovitz—they’d served together. Behind the joker’s facade was a stone-cold professional who could disassemble a machine gun blindfolded.

General Gordon Lamar, gaunt with an eagle-like profile, ignored the remark and clicked the projector. Satellite images of Gorky-17’s ruins flashed on-screen—surrounded by barbed wire and "BIOHAZARD" signs.

"The city’s officially gone. Media says it was a chemical leak," Lamar’s voice was dry as a report. "But three weeks ago, we picked up anomalous radio signals from the zone. Then came a message—fragments about ‘uncontrolled experiments.’ Alpha Team went in. Their last signal came from the port district. Your job—find them and figure out what happened."

"General, permission to ask a question." Thierry's voice cut through the silence. "After losing contact with Alpha, did you send reconnaissance drones?"

Lamar measured him with an appraising look, then nodded.

"Yes, we attempted to. But as soon as both of our craft entered the zone, they managed to transmit only about fifteen seconds of corrupted video—and then vanished from radar. They weren't shot down; they just... powered down. As if someone flipped a switch."

Jarek turned to Thiery, smirking:

"What, they invite eggheads too?"

Novak and Seamus chuckled. Thiery slowly lifted his head. His eyes narrowed like he’d just spotted a particularly vile bacterium under a microscope.

"Putain militarisé," he hissed under his breath. ("Whore in uniform.")

Lamar cut in sharply:

"Monsieur Trantigne is one of the top biochemical weapons specialists. If something's broken loose in there, we'll need his expertise."

Thiery forced himself to focus. His hand absently sketched a caricature in his notebook—a grotesque monster ripping the head off a stick figure with its pants down, labeled "Ovitz."

"Understood?" Lamar scanned the room.

"Yes, sir!" the team barked.

"Ovitz, you clear?"

The Pole clicked his tongue:

"Da, no questions yet. Jarek Ovitz ready for action!"

The general nodded slowly, then added, lowering his voice:

"Prepare for the worst."

Jarek grinned:

"The worst? Hell, we might even get to shoot something, boys!"

He elbowed Seamus, who let out a raspy laugh. Novak just grunted. Cole didn't join in. His gaze slid over the others:

Medic Anton Vazovski, silently checking his kit as if already picturing the wounds he'd treat.

Thiery, fists clenched but eyes already analyzing the maps.

Only Jarek acted like this was just another mission. But Cole knew—there was something else beneath the bravado.

Before dismissing them, Lamar added:

"One more thing… If you see something… unexplainable—do not engage. Fall back and report."

There was a note in his voice Cole had never heard before.

Fear.

"Something's off," Cole thought, watching the projector flicker. "They're hiding something… What the hell did they find in there?"

Somewhere beyond the base, the wind howled—like a warning.

Tomorrow, they'd step into hell.

OCTOBER 26, 2035, 04:00 AM

Thick, milky, lifeless fog shrouded the port like a burial shroud. It didn't just hang in the air—it slithered, clinging to skin, seeping into lungs, leaving a taste of metal and decay on the lips.

The hum of an engine—quiet, muffled—cut through the silence. A motorboat emerged slowly from the white haze.

"Novak, throttle down to minimum," Cole didn't raise his voice, but every word came out sharp, like an order before an assault.

He lifted his thermal scope, peering into the pale mist. The device flickered, showing blurred outlines—abandoned boats, capsized fishing vessels, something...
Something else. But the signal wavered, distorted, as if the fog itself were alive and interfering with the tech.

Thiery sat hunched over. His fingers trembled—not just from the cold. His gear—thermal, sealed—did nothing. The chill crept inside, wrapped around his bones, gnawed at his flesh. He flinched when something stirred in the water—right beside the boat. Not a fish. Bigger. Slower.

He squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head. "Imagination. Just imagination."

But when he opened his eyes, ripples still spread across the water's surface.

He shouldn't have been here. He was a biochemist, a PhD, a man who three years ago had been unraveling protein structures in a pristine lab with air conditioning and a coffee machine. And now—this port. Why him? Why not someone else?

Jarek dozed, sprawled across the seat, his heavy head lolling left and right.
The others stayed silent. Seamus gripped his rifle. Anton stared blankly into the fog, his eyes hollow, as if he'd already seen what awaited them.

The boat docked quietly at a half-collapsed pier. The planks groaned under their weight, sagging like they were rotting from within.

Cole was the first ashore, scanning the perimeter—no tracks.

"Where's Alpha? Where's anyone?"

Mark raised the radio:

"Trombone, this is Flute. Come in. Beta Team in position. Do you copy?"

Silence. Just static—hissing, crackling, something...
Like breathing.

"Useless," Thiery snatched the radio, checked the settings. "EM interference. All frequencies are jammed."

Mark tried again:

"Trombone, respond!"

No answer. Just the echo of his own voice, swallowed by the fog.

The mist over the water thickened like a living wall, but on land, it thinned, leaving behind a sticky, shimmering haze through which the outlines of a dead city emerged.

"Yeah, you're right," Mark muttered, still staring at the radio's static. Thiery's fingers nervously flicked through frequencies, but all he caught was white noise and the occasional warped voice, as if rising from beneath the water.

Jarek smirked, lounging on a rusted bollard, and banged his rifle butt against the metal to get their attention:

"Oh yeah, Professor X is gonna rub his balls and tap into the supernet now, huh? Fix everything?"

Thiery didn't look up, but his grip on the radio tightened until the plastic creaked.

"Yeah, first thing I'll ask him is to teach you how to tell a joke."

He shook the device, as if hoping that would clear the interference, then sighed:

"The jamming's too strong. We need a relay with a boosted signal."

Jarek raised an eyebrow, eyeing the scientist mockingly:

"We got one of those, Professor?"

Thiery didn't answer right away. Instead, he slowly raised a hand and pointed toward a tall radio tower looming over the rooftops of abandoned warehouses.

"No. But we can patch into... that tower."

It stood in the distance, unnaturally straight among the ruins. But something was off.

"It's covered with a tarp," Thiery muttered, adjusting his glasses.

Strange. Who'd bother climbing up there to cover it? And why—like they were hiding something?

Cole walked over, clapped him on the shoulder, cutting off his thoughts:

"Monsieur Trantigne, you sure we can reach base through that?"

Thiery pulled out a device—bulky, with blinking sensors, resembling a ghost-hunting gadget but cruder, like it had been slapped together in a hurry.

"My scanner shows... a 70% success rate."

Cole smirked:

"Well, glad it’s not 7%."

He scanned the group, his voice turning hard:

"Listen up. We move to the tower. No stragglers. No ‘I’ll check this out.’ Everyone stays in sight."

The city was silent. Broken windows gaped like empty eye sockets. Graffiti covered the walls—screaming, senseless symbols, as if painted in panic. Ship carcasses rusted at the docks, their skeletons jutting from the water like the bones of a giant.

But the worst part was the silence. Too quiet. Not even wind. And the feeling... The feeling they weren’t alone. Something was here. Unseen. Hidden in the fog. Watching.

The shattered streets, veiled in poison mist, resembled the guts of some colossal dead beast. Beta Team moved quietly, single file, hugging the walls.

Cole led, his thermal scope picking up blurred shapes in the gray haze—empty cars, overturned dumpsters, something... Something that slipped around a corner too fast.

Shattered storefronts. Glass crunched under boots like bones.

"Smoke break," Cole signaled, and the squad fanned out, checking alleys, windows, dark passages.

Thiery slumped against a wall, pulled out his makeshift box of wires, and started connecting it to the radio.

The wires wouldn’t link. The ports didn’t match.

"Merde..."

Jarek leaned beside him, lit a cigarette (despite Cole’s orders), and grinned:

"You take this long with women too, Professor? Or just tech?"

Thiery didn’t look up, but his fingers clenched the wire until his knuckles whitened.

"Since you’re here..." He suddenly turned, shoving a stripped wire at Jarek. "Hold this. Need to reroute."

Jarek took it without thinking.

SNAP.

A jolt surged through him, muscles seizing. Thiery yanked the wire back, now wearing a rubber glove.

"Noticed your Onirique implants. Great conductors. Needed a power source."

Jarek froze. His eyes flashed with rage, but a second later, he let out a raspy laugh, baring his teeth:

"Fucking nerd. What the hell do we even need you for—"

Then Thiery saw something. Out of the corner of his eye. The fog shifted. There, between broken streetlights, stood a man.

Or not a man.
The shape was almost right... but too tall. Too wrong. Jarek saw it too.

"The hell—" He dropped low, grabbing his rifle. "Major! We got a ‘civilian’!"

Cole spun, raising a fist—silence.

The figure didn’t move. Only the fog swirled around it, as if flowing around something unseen.

At first, it looked wounded.

Pale, almost gray skin, pocked with sores and yellow, weeping growths along its spine. Its back pulsed, breathing, like something alive squirming beneath.

"Hold position!" Cole barked, arm up.

The squad froze instantly, rifles trained on the thing.

"Identify yourself," Cole commanded.

Only a wet, gurgling murmur answered, as if its throat were full of fluid.

"Looks like shock," Anton said—then, without orders, lunged forward, grabbing its wrist to check for a pulse. His face twisted.

"No pulse, Major—"

Then the thing’s fingers closed around his arm.

"FUCK!" Anton screamed, yanking back, but the grip was inhuman.

Its skin moved. Blisters. Swelling. Splitting.

"You heard the man, asshole!" Jarek already had his sights lined up, finger on the trigger.

"No, don’t shoot!" Thiery rushed forward—too late.

A gunshot. The bullet punched into its forehead with a wet squelch. But it didn’t fall. Its throat split open, revealing two rows of jagged, crooked teeth—like a deep-sea fish.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" Jarek stumbled back, gripping his rifle.

The creature sank its teeth into Anton’s arm. Bone crunched. Blood—thick, almost black—splattered the asphalt. Anton shrieked, thrashing, but the monster held on.

Cole fired—twice, three times. Its body jerked but didn't stop. The mutation accelerated. Its head split open, peeling apart into something between a lizard and a mantis, with faceted eyes glinting like shattered glass.

Its back bulged, bones snapping and reforming, stretching into a long, segmented tail lined with chitinous spikes.
Flesh split, exposing muscle, pulsing veins, mucous membranes. It dropped to all fours, its new limbs bending backward like a locust's, shrieking—a sound no human throat could make.

A Sfinks. A nightmare of flesh and bone. And it was staring right at them.

The creature—now fully transformed into a grotesque, chitinous horror—lunged.

Its claws dug into asphalt, leaving sticky trails.

"FIRE!"

Cole didn't yell—his voice cut like a blade. A wall of lead tore into the thing. Bullets ripped through it, spraying chunks of meat, but it kept coming, as if pain meant nothing.

Anton, writhing, raised his pistol—

Two shots to the head. Its skull cracked, and finally, it collapsed.

"Agh—fuck, burns like hell—" Anton clutched his mangled arm, blood oozing between his fingers. Thiery stood frozen, pistol in hand, face white as snow.

Silence. Even Jarek was quiet.

"Holy Mother of God!" Tartakovsky broke it first, voice shaking. "What the hell is that?!"

Cole slowly reloaded, eyes locked on the corpse.

"This is the 'worst' they warned us about."

He took a deep breath.

"We don't know what they're capable of. Or how many are here. One wrong move—we're dead."

Thiery and Mark were already at Anton's side, bandaging the wound. Anton jabbed himself with morphine, whispering:

"Not an amputation... Not an amputation..."

Jarek clapped him on the shoulder:

"Quit whining, Vasovski. You'll keep the arm. Still got babes to grope. If not—Egghead here'll make you a prosthetic. Be like Terminator."

Anton chuckled through the pain.

Then—a howl.

Close. Another. More. Cole’s head snapped up:

"Gunfire drew them."

He assessed fast:

"Trantigne, Novak—you’re with Anton. Jarek, Tartakovsky—on me. Tartakovsky, watch our six."

Jarek grinned, checking his ammo:

"What, boss, throwback to the good ol’ days?"

Cole slid a fresh mag into his rifle.

"Looks like it."

Something stirred in the fog.

The squad advanced in short bursts, covering each other. The fog thickened into a milky haze, barely revealing the outlines of derelict houses.

The only sounds were the scuffing of boots on wet asphalt and Anton’s ragged breathing as he clenched his teeth, tightening a bloodied bandage around his arm.

"Hang in there, old man," Mark whispered, scanning their surroundings.

But something was already watching them.

Tartakovsky raised a fist—the signal to halt.

"Scouting ahead," he muttered before lunging toward a lumber truck blocking the road.

The wood was rotten, swollen with moisture, blackened by mold. Seamus pressed against the cab, listening. Then—metal creaked.

The truck shuddered. Slowly, he looked up.

It sat on the roof. A triangular head swiveled on an unnaturally long neck, eyes like gasoline puddles shimmering in the dim light.

It growled. It had seen them.

"CONTACT, EIGHT O’CLOCK!" Tartakovsky raised his rifle and fired.

Three shots. A hit. The bullets tore into its torso and the crest on its skull, splattering thick black sludge.

The creature roared and leaped from the truck, landing right in front of him. Seamus had no time to reload—a whip-like tail cracked through the air, knocking him off his feet. The impact was brutal. His body slammed into the truck door, his back numb with pain. A jagged maw gaped open, dripping saliva.

"Eat this, you damn Sfinks!"

A combat boot smashed into the creature's face, crunching cartilage. Cole was already moving, rifle raised.

"Fire!"

A storm of bullets ripped into the mutant's exposed back, shredding flesh. Tartakovsky scrambled up and emptied a burst into its skull. The head exploded, black ooze splattering the asphalt. The creature twitched once, then lay still.

Cole stepped forward, flipping the corpse with his boot.

"Next time, Tartakovsky," he said, reloading, "call me first."

Seamus wiped blood from his lips and smirked.

"Yes, sir."

Cole barely had time to shout "Behind us!" before two Sfinkses lunged between the soldiers, cutting off Tartakovsky and Cole from the group. Their movements were unnaturally fluid, as if their joints rotated 360 degrees.

Thiery flicked off the safety of his pistol and fired point-blank. The bullet whistled past the left Sfinx's head, leaving behind the acrid stench of gunpowder and ringing ears.

"Merde!" he cursed, his palms slick with sweat.

The right mutant seized the moment. Three leaps—first onto a barrel, then a wall, then straight at Ovitz. They crashed to the ground in a cloud of dust. Jarek found himself pinned beneath the beast, its hot, rancid breath washing over him.

"Think you can take me, freak?!" His voice became an animalistic snarl.

His left arm blocked the fangs inches from his throat while his right drew a combat knife. A wet crunch—warm slime and half-digested filth spilled onto his fatigues.

"Choke on this!"

With a sharp twist, he ripped the blade downward, gutting the creature. Entrails slapped onto his chest with a sickening squelch.

"Shoot already, egghead!" Jarek barked, rolling aside.

Thiery steadied himself, exhaled, and fired. The second shot struck a bulging compound eye. The lens burst, spraying yellowish fluid.

The mutant howled but didn’t retreat. It coiled to pounce—just as automatic gunfire stitched its back. Cole and Tartakovsky had broken through, laying down suppressing fire.

Thiery stepped closer, pressed the barrel to the base of its skull.

"Au revoir, monstre."

A gunshot. The head shattered like overripe fruit. The body convulsed, then stilled.

Cole assessed the situation swiftly.

"Status?"

Jarek wiped his bloody knife on his pants.

"All good, boss. Just reliving my glory days—hand-to-hand, blood, adrenaline..."

Anton leaned against a wall, clutching his bandaged arm.

"Arm’s... going numb. Fever’s rising. But I’ll live."

Cole nodded, barking orders.

"Ovitz, Tartakovsky—sector A. Novak—sector B. Trantigne, with me. Cover the doc. Five-meter intervals, move fast."

"Thiery, rear guard. Stay close."

The scientist nodded, gripping his pistol. The lumber truck looked less abandoned—more hurled there with monstrous force. And beyond it... a ditch. And inside—bodies.

Cole motioned for Thiery to hold position near the truck while he crept forward, rifle ready. Mud squelched under his boots.

He knelt by the first corpse.

"Over here!" His voice cut through the silence. "It’s Alpha Team."

He toed the body over. The face was bloated—greenish-gray, capillaries burst, frozen in a silent scream.

Cole studied it.

"Leif Sorensen."

One of their best techs. Now dead, eyes vacant.

"God... Sara... at least you didn’t die like this."

He shook his head, forcing the thought away.

"What the hell happened here?"

A second corpse in tattered UN gear lay facedown. Thiery frowned, turning it over—then froze.

Thiery (softly, to himself):
"Giancarlo... Damn it."

Giancarlo Trotti—once a stoic, unflappable Italian—now lay twisted in the mud.

"You knew him?" Cole lowered his rifle.

"Yes. We studied together. He was... unshakable." Thiery clenched his fists. "Could play chess under mortar fire and laugh. Nothing ever rattled him."

Jarek, standing nearby, snorted.

"Well, looks like your buddy’s real calm now."

Thiery turned slowly. His face was a mask.

"Say that again."

Jarek grinned, wide and insolently.

"What, hard of hearing? I said your friend’s finally—

The punch came without warning. Thiery pivoted, his fist—honed in Nantes backstreets—crunching into Jarek’s jaw.

The Pole staggered back, slamming against a rusted car. He spat blood, then looked up. Not anger in his eyes—respect.

"Nice hit, bastard."

"Next joke, I rip out your tongue," Thiery hissed.

He stepped forward, but Cole blocked him, his voice a whip-crack of fury.

"ENOUGH! No infighting on my watch!"

Thiery’s fists stayed clenched.

"How dare he speak of my comrade like—

"You’re risking us all brawling in the open!" Cole snarled. "Settle it after the mission."

Jarek pushed himself up, wiping his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah..."

He stepped back, shoulders tense. Thiery exhaled, uncurling his fists. Cole turned to the corpses.

"Look closer. Something's wrong here..."

Jarek glanced at Thiery, then crouched.

"The skin... It's green. Not just decay."

Thiery touched the body, recoiling.

"It's... sticky. And cold."

Seamus tensed.

"What the hell happened to them?"

The wind rustled the grass, carrying the stench of chemicals and rot. No answer came. Only the dead stared back with hollow eyes.

Cole wiped blood from his face, his voice hollow.

"Good question. If soldiers like these died like this... who knows what's waiting for us."

Tartakovsky scanned the perimeter through his scope, fingers tapping the stock.

"Alpha Team—four men. No sign of McFadden or Christensen."

Cole clenched his fist. "Find them. Alive. That's an order."

Jarek smirked. "This town really hates guests. Especially living ones."

Before Cole could reply—

GUNSHOT.

Precise. Cold. Professional.

Novak's head exploded. Bone fragments fanned out like shrapnel. Brain matter slapped the asphalt. Blood sprayed Thiery and Tartakovsky.

The Frenchman stood frozen, eyes wide. His face, neck, chest—drenched. He didn't breathe. Didn't blink. Just stared at what was left.

GUNSHOT. Another.

Tartakovsky reacted on instinct—yanking Thiery down as a bullet whizzed past where his head had been.

"SNIPER! COVER NOW!" Cole's roar split the air.

Trained reflexes took over:

Cole and Jarek rolled behind an overturned Trabant—metal clanging. Tartakovsky shielded Thiery, pressing him into the mud. Anton dove under the truck, his wounded arm smearing blood.

BANG. A third shot.

The bullet sparked off rusted metal inches from Cole's head. He didn't flinch. Just analyzed:

Muffled report—suppressed.

Three-second intervals. Trajectory—that way. A two-story building with shattered windows. Second floor.

Jarek, never taking his eye off the scope, hissed: "What the hell's the shooter waiting for?" Cole slowly shook his head: "He's not waiting. He—"

A shadow in the window. A glint of optics.

"—is reloading."

Gunfire shattered the silence of the dead city. Shrapnel from bricks and glass rained onto the asphalt after every explosive round.

Jarek Ovitz pressed himself against a shattered concrete slab.

"That bastard's on the second floor, fifth entrance," he hissed, reloading his magazine. "Firing explosive rounds from AS Val riffle. Judging by the sound, his barrel's so fouled it'll jam any second."

Cole nodded, assessing the situation.

"Three-round mag, 15-second reload. Let him fire—then we breach."

Another shot. The explosive round slammed into the concrete half a meter from Jarek, showering him with debris.

"That's it, you fuckin' corpse—enough!"

Ovitz leaned out and unleashed a burst at the second-floor windows. Glass shattered, something crashed inside.

"He's jammed!" Cole lunged forward, rolling toward the entrance.

Jarek covered him, hosing the third floor with wild suppressive fire.

"Cover us!" he shouted to the remaining fighters in cover.

Cole shoulder-checked the door. The stench hit him—burst sewage, mold, something sickly-sweet and rotten. Gunfire echoed from above—the sniper was firing through the wall, tearing through plaster.

Stairs. Darkness. Corpses.

On the landing between the second and third floors lay several mutants.

Sfinks—its tail blown off, skull split by a high-caliber round. Something crab-like with four mantis-clawed legs and a grotesquely bent appendage resembling a tail—its face deformed by a gaping head wound. A humanoid in tattered rags, a scythe beside it—intestines spilled across the floor like worms. A hornet-like creature with a human head and a stinger—its chest ripped open by a massive hole.

Cole tightened his grip on his pistol and moved forward.

Muttering. From the apartment across the hall came a choked whisper, ragged sobs. Jarek stepped over the dead flesh, following him.

Cole signaled: "Quiet."

He pulled a gas grenade. Yanked the pin.

A dull thump, white smoke filled the room.

Hacking coughs from inside. They stormed the apartment.

Jarek went in first, rifle-butting a deranged man clawing at his own throat. The rifle clattered to the floor, snatched mid-air.

"Cole, check this out!" Jarek recoiled, aiming.

A man sat in the corner, twitching. His skin was mottled black and yellow, like rotting meat. His eyes—cloudy, weeping—burned with a horrifying awareness.

The walls were scratched—not by knives, but claws. Furniture overturned, smashed. The stench—excrement, decay, something cloying like spoiled honey.

"Ride the snake, ride the snake, snake is long seven miles, ride the snake, ride the snake…" he mumbled, drooling.

Cole crouched slowly, finger on the trigger.

"Who are you? Why'd you shoot at us?"

The answer: vomit. Thick, black, with chunks of something writhing. Ovitz and Cole leapt back.

"Fuck!"

The man coughed, laughed, spoke—his voice unnatural.

"Everything's fine… All in order… I must live… and you will die."

"The hell's this shit?!" Cole kept his gun trained, unsure if it was delirium or a threat.

" Ride the snake … ascend to the gems… the end is near…"

Then he pulled the pin.

"GRENADE!"

Cole shoved Jarek hard, knocking him down. The explosion. The roar. Warm gore and meat chunks plastered them.

"Motherfu—cker…" Jarek spat, shaking off entrails.

Cole stood, scanning the room. The corpse was shredded. But something remained.

A bag. A filthy uniform. A box of ammo. Cole picked up the jacket, read the name on the sleeve:

"Kristensen."

"So… the third from Alpha?" Jarek wiped his face, leaving bloody streaks.

"Him." Cole nodded at the empty ampoules and scattered pills. "Held on with injections. Until he broke."

The walls. Claw marks. Not human. The floor. Blood. The window. Barricaded from the inside.

"He wasn’t running. He locked himself in here."

Cole grabbed the rifle, checked the mag.

"Take the rifle and ammo. We’re moving."

Cole froze by the window, fingers gripping the sill.

"You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me."

His voice was dry, almost emotionless, but Jarek instantly knew—something was wrong. He stepped closer.

"What is it, old man?"

Then he saw it. The radio tower.

But not just a tower.

"Well, shit…" Jarek whistled, recoiled for a second, then stared harder.

Cole moved first, crouched, rifle ready. His eyes never left the distant tower.

A hand signal—"clear."

The squad advanced, fanning out—Ovitz and Seamus covering the rear, Anton, pale but steady, gripping his pistol in his good hand.

"How's Anton?" Cole checked his mag without turning.

"Arm's numb, but stable," Anton tried to smile, but it came out crooked. "Not as bad as I thought."

"Thrilling." Cole racked the slide. "Check your gear. Count your rounds."

"Trantigne." Cole nodded at the tower. "You said something was off about it."

"Yeah, Major. And?"

Cole exhaled, staring straight at him:

"That's not a tarp… That's something fucking alive."

Thiery pulled out binoculars, focused.

Something stingray-like clung to it entirely—massive, pulsating, dirty blue like a shark's rotting flesh. It shifted slowly, undulating as if breathing.

Around it—static sparks, air shimmering like over scorching asphalt.

"Incredible…" Thiery whispered, eyes wide. "It's generating an EM field! That's why comms are down!"

Jarek racked his rifle's bolt:
"Then let's blow that fucker up. What're we waitin' for?"

Cole studied the scientist's reaction. Conflict burned in Thiery's eyes—scientific fascination versus survival instinct.

"It might work," Thiery finally muttered, wiping fogged glasses.
"But this is a valuable specimen for science…"

Jarek snorted:
"Hey, Professor, we ain't on a zoo tour. This shit's in our way. We drop it—you can keep the leftovers."

Cole nodded, voice steely:
"Ovitz is right. It's a mission hazard. And we know nothing about these things."

The ruined courtyards greeted them with oppressive silence. Crumbling five-story buildings with hollow window sockets, shattered Zhigulis, rusted playground swings—all reeked of abandonment.

When the Radio Zarya building came into view, Cole halted the group.

"Plan: Me, Thiery, and Tartakovsky take the fire escape. Ovitz, you and Vasovsky hold the ground—cover us."

Jarek flicked his sniper rifle's safety:

"Copy, boss." He tossed Thiery an assault rifle: "Here, Prof. Try not to shoot my ass off."

Before climbing, Cole leaned into Jarek:
"Stay sharp. These freaks are close."

The rusty stairs groaned under their weight. On the second floor, Cole threw up a fist—halt. A gurgling snarl came from around the corner.

Cole barely pressed against the wall when something burst through the window.

"CONTACT!"

The monster was worse than the others. Its murky-green skin flaked off, exposing bluish muscle. Its head stretched unnaturally, lower jaw unhinged, revealing rows of needle-teeth. Long, joint-twisted arms clawed at the walls.

Three shots from Cole punched through its chest, but it only howled and sank fangs into his shoulder. White-hot pain lanced through him—like boiling electrolyte injected into his veins.

The narrow landing left no room to maneuver. Gritting his teeth, Cole drew his knife. The blade gutted the beast, spilling black sludge.

The creature staggered back, nearly toppling over the railing. Cole gave it no chance—a rifle burst blew its skull apart, sending the body crashing down toward Jarek.

"Clear," Cole muttered, wiping gore from his face. His shoulder throbbed, but the mission came first.

Thiery stared at the aftermath with morbid fascination—horror and curiosity at war in his gaze.

Thiery shouldered the rifle, feeling the cold metal through his vest. His fingers trembled—not from fear, but adrenaline. The crosshairs flicked over a gorilla-like muzzle, pustules oozing yellow.

"Breathe in… Out…"

Bang.

The recoil punched his shoulder, but the bullet found its mark—the creature's head exploded like overripe fruit. Its corpse collapsed near Jarek, splattering him with black slime.

Thiery rushed to the equipment, splicing wires.

"Seamus, cover me!"

A surge of electricity raced up the antenna. Sparks danced over metal. The stingray-thing shrieked, peeling off—until…

Its head burst like a pus-filled sack. The fifteen-meter carcass swayed… then plummeted—straight toward Jarek on the flimsy bridge below.

Jarek looked up and saw death descending:

"You've gotta be shittin' me?!"

He lunged aside—too late. The bridge groaned, supports snapped, and Jarek fell into darkness.

Jarek woke to searing pain in his leg.

"Dislocated… Or worse."

He tried to stand—agony forced him back down.

Voices above:

"Ovitz! Hang on, we're coming!" —Seamus, distant, muffled.

"Goddamn it! Move your asses—I ain't dyin' in this shithole!" His own voice grated through clenched teeth.

A rustle. Right beside him. Jarek froze, hand darting to his pistol. Something emerged from the wreckage. Human? No.

A shredded hazmat suit, skin crusted with scabs. Eyes—yellow, feral. A respirator fused into its jaw. Its spine hunched grotesquely under a rusted "shell" resembling a trash bin. One arm—a hook wrapped in bloody rags. The other—a mutated claw, tumors writhing on its surface.

The creature turned. Saw him.

Jarek's pistol shook. Two shots. Bullets ricocheted off its armored shell.

"Son of a bitch… Tank-armored bastard."

He forced himself to crawl, morphine dulling the pain. His eyes scanned the wreckage—then locked onto a corpse.

A rotting body, fingers gripping a battered KS-23 shotgun.

Salvation.

The creature lunged. Jarek rolled as its hook whistled past his temple, embedding in concrete. Shrapnel cut his face.

He tried to rise—too slow. The claw slammed into his face. Blood blinded his right eye.

The world swam, but instinct kicked in. The hook struck again—Jarek dodged, but not enough. The tip pierced his shoulder, pinning muscle.

"Gah—!"

He didn't drop the shotgun.

The creature hissed, raising its other claw—a swollen sac of flesh bubbled with orange liquid. Napalm charge.

"Love the smell of napalm in the mornin'…"

Point-blank shot.

The monster's chest ruptured, organs exposed. It staggered back—right into fuel barrels.

Jarek didn't fire. "Wait… Wait…"

The beast recovered, raising its claw—napalm primed to incinerate him.

"C'mon, you fuck… My turn."

BOOM.

The barrels detonated as the napalm ignited. The creature screamed—not animal, not human—something worse. Flames consumed it, bursting it from within.

Jarek limped forward, pain cutting through the morphine.

Reload. Raise the barrel. Headshot.

Victory.

"Armored shitbag—zero. Jarek—one."

A growl behind him. Sfinks. Pouncing. Shotgun dropped. Knife in hand.

"You want some too, bitch?"

The pounce—

BANG.

Sfinks' skull vaporized.

Seamus stood there, smoking barrel, grinning.

"Damn freaks…" He wiped soot off his brow. "Took some work gettin' down here."

Jarek, leaning against rubble, raised an eyebrow:

"Work? Don't see any sweat on ya."

Cole surveyed the battlefield—charred mutant, wrecked excavator, Jarek's blood trail.

"You've been busy," he remarked dryly.

Jarek smirked, clutching his shoulder:

"Yeah… dropped a big bastard, ’bout your size." Pain twisted his face—masked by the smirk.

Cole clapped his good shoulder, nodded to Anton:

"Medic, patch him up."

Thiery crouched by the mutant’s corpse, studying the claw tumors. Seamus lit a cigarette, blowing smoke at the dead beast.

"Ovitz says this fucker shot napalm-like shit from its claw."

Seamus crossed his arms: "Hallucinating?"

Thiery didn’t look up, running a glove over the armored plating.

"No. And I doubt this is the worst we’ll see."

Anton finished bandaging Jarek’s leg, tightening the tourniquet.

"Done. Hold tight ’til we extract."

Jarek lit a cigarette, wincing at the iodine sting, and glanced at Cole:

"More fun than that African shithole, huh, Cole?"

Cole adjusted his sling: "Understatement."

Thiery twisted the radio dials. Static. Screeching. A faint voice broke through:

"Trombone… this… Flute… come in…"

He repeated the codes. No response.

"Dammit!"

Seamus cursed: "That flying fuck must’ve fried the antenna. Waste of time."

Thiery shook his head: "No. Different frequencies. Something else is jamming us."

Cole eyed him: "Can you send a coded pulse?"

Thiery typed the encryption. No luck.

Cole stood: "Enough. We find Alpha’s survivors first. Deal with base later."

Jarek reloaded his shotgun: "Let’s roll."

As the squad moved toward the bridge exit, Anton suddenly froze, staring into the distance.

“Major! Look!”

He pointed at one of the five-story buildings. On the fifth floor, a light flickered—three short, three long, three short. SOS.

Cole squinted, then gave a sharp nod:
“Move out.”

“We might’ve found ‘Alpha’,” Cole said quietly. “Check your ammo.”

Thiery asked:
“Cole, what if it’s a trap?”

Cole didn’t turn around:
“Today, I’ve seen all kinds of weird shit. But I doubt these freaks are smart enough to signal us with a flashlight.”

The squad moved cautiously, covering sectors, weapons at the ready.

Cole took point, scanning windows, doorways, alleys—his finger resting on the trigger.

Thiery stayed in the center, clutching a portable radiation detector—the needle twitched but showed nothing.

Jarek covered their rear, shotgun slung over his shoulder, his gaze cold as steel. Seamus flanked, checking every corner, every shadow.

Anton limped but held his ground—the wound on his arm had already turned black, but he stayed silent.

Nothing. No sound. No movement.

Just the wind whispering through broken glass and the creak of rusted signs. The tension was so thick, the air itself felt ready to explode.

The door was unlocked. The hinges screeched like a gunshot. Stairs. Darkness. The stench of mold.

Step. Another step. Fifth floor. The apartment door was ajar. Cole and Seamus burst in, rifles raised.

Darkness. Dust. Chaos. And in the corner—a figure. An old man, pressed against the wall. A dirty gray sweater. Black pants. A face bruised, dusty, terrified. A knife in one hand. A flashlight in the other.

“Don’t shoot! I’m human!” His voice was hoarse, trembling.

The squad didn’t expect this. Muzzles still trained on him.

What if he isn’t human? What if it’s… one of them?

“Hands behind your head!” Cole kept his rifle steady. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

The old man gasped, words stumbling:
“M-my name’s… V-Vasilij… Who… who are you? Americans?”

Jarek lowered his shotgun slightly:
“Not all of us. I’m Polish…”

Cole cut him off sharply:
“We’re a rescue team. That’s all you need to know. How are you still alive?”

Vasilij swallowed, eyes darting between them:
“Honestly… I don’t even know. It all happened so fast…”

He fell silent, then spoke again, as if forcing himself through a nightmare:
“I saw my friends, my neighbors… turn into those… monsters. Right in front of me. Like something from the worst nightmares.”

The squad exchanged glances.

The creatures… they were people. The city’s residents.

Thiery crouched beside him, voice calm:
“It’s alright. Keep going.”

Vasilij wiped his face with a dirty sleeve:
“These… things… I barricaded myself in my place, but… I screwed up. Had to run here.”

He stared into nothingness.
“I saw… two men. Fighting… something. Or each other. Or… an invisible enemy. Then… their skin turned green. They gasped for air… and just died.”

“Were they in uniform? Like ours?”

Cole kept his rifle raised, finger on the trigger. Vasilij grabbed the edge of Cole’s vest, comparing the camouflage.
“Y-yes… just like that. There were only two…”

Thiery glanced at Cole—he doesn’t believe him.

“If I stay here, those things will find me sooner or later.” Vasilij wiped sweat from his brow. “I’ll help you. I know every alley in this district.”

Cole yanked him up by the forearm.
“Stay behind us. One wrong move, and you’re in the line of fire.” A pause. “You sure those two were alone? No woman?”

“Positive.” The old man shook his head. “You’re the first living people in…”

A roar. Unhuman. Somewhere outside.

“Oh God! They’re coming!” Vasilij pressed himself against the wall, eyes bulging.

“Keep it together, old man.”

Jarek racked his old shotgun. “Ovitz is about to turn these Freddy Kruegers into paste.”

“They’re on the walls!” Seamus shouted, leaping back from the window.

Glass shattered. It burst in.

Orange. Hulking. A face—twisted metal plates fused into a grin, eyes—two red slits.

Claws. Long as machetes, jutting from its wrists. Vasilij screamed, fell onto his back—the claws stabbed the floor inches from his throat.

A gunshot. The mutant’s head exploded into gore, brain matter splattering the wall. The corpse collapsed, crushing the roof of a rusted Trabant.

“More of them.” Jarek pressed against the window frame, shotgun braced. The building’s walls moved. Shadows. Crawling. Claws digging into brick.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake…”

Boom. Buckshot tore into one’s shoulder, but it didn’t stop. Didn’t feel pain.

“Aim for the heads!” Cole barked, turning toward the door. Mutants poured through the windows.

“To the hallway! Regroup!” Cole dragged Vasilij as Thiery tossed a smoke grenade.

Jarek reloaded, fingers trembling.

Not from fear. From rage.

“Come on, you freaks…”

He waited, the first head in his crosshairs. The bedroom. Broken windows. The darkness outside breathed.

Jarek racked the shotgun.

“Alright, boys, there’s a whole pack of these bastards. We move before it’s too late.”

His voice was rough but steady. Anton clutched his wounded arm, hissing through his teeth:
“How many?”

“Counted five.”

CRACK!
Glass in the next room exploded. Vasilij pressed against the wall, trembling fingers gripping his knife.

“They’re inside.” A whisper, barely audible. “They saw my signal… They’re coming for you.”

A screech! Claws scraped wood. The door shuddered—curved talons punched through like a hot knife through butter. Seamus didn't wait.

Three blind shots through the door. A shriek. Feral, inhuman.

The door exploded inward.

Another hybrid staggered in—hunched, jagged-toothed, skin like wet rubber.

"Damn it!" Seamus dodged, reloading. "Not my fucking day."

Jarek laughed:
"Reminds me of that ambush in Kashmir…"

Cole fired without looking back:
"The Indians were nicer. Smelled better too."

Vasilij lunged for a closet, pulled out a Molotov, lit it. The bottle sailed, shattered on the creature's face. Flames engulfed its skin.

The "Krueger" thrashed, crashed into walls—then Seamus struck. Six shots to the spine. Bullets shredded its vertebrae. The beast snarled, collapsed, smashing a table by the window. Fire licked the curtains. Smoke. Heat.

Cole shouted:
"Squad, fall back!"

They barely made it to the stairwell when more creatures flooded the apartment. Two "Kruegers"—and something new. A thing with jaundiced skin veined in black. Four snake-like tendrils writhed from its head, and where its jaw should've been, rows of piranha teeth gaped. A nightmare harlequin.

Thiery slammed the door just as bone blades—extending from the monster's wrists—stabbed through the wood, inches from his face.
"Crowbar! Get me a crowbar!"

Seamus shoved a metal rod into the frame. The door held.

"This won't last long," Thiery whispered. "Maybe ten minutes."

Third floor. A ruined apartment. The door burst apart.

Sfinks—scarred skin, bared fangs—lumbered onto the landing.

Vasilij didn't flinch. His knife flashed—one, two, three strikes to the neck. Black blood sprayed the walls, but the beast didn't stop. A clawed paw swiped—the old man cried out, slamming into the wall, but stabbed again.

Jarek swung his shotgun like a club, crushing the thing's skull without hitting Vasilij. Bone cracked. Two point-blank shots—finally, Sfinks collapsed, twitching.

“Alive?” Jarek rasped, hauling Vasilij up.

The old man clutched his side, blood seeping through his fingers, staining his vest.

“It… got me…”

“You’ll live,” Jarek dragged him toward the exit, eyes already scanning for the next threat.

The courtyard. Hell on earth.

A “Krueger” and the “Harlequin” lurched from the shadows, spider-like. The first lunged at Thiery—claws whistling past his face. The Frenchman stabbed its back, but the blade snapped as the mutant twisted violently.

Rolling away, Thiery fired three times—first shot tore its jaw off, the second blew through an eye socket, the third finally dropped it.

Cole and Seamus focused fire on the second. Bullets ripped into it, but it kept crawling—legless. Seamus finished it with a headshot.

“We need a distraction!” Anton fired controlled bursts, keeping the creatures at bay.

Cole glanced back:
“Ideas?”

Seamus was already rigging plastique to a rusted Volga.
“Thirty seconds!”

Alleys. Dark. Narrow. Behind them—roars, footsteps, clicking claws. A fireball erupted, shredding two “Harlequins” to pieces.

The rest retreated—briefly. Vasilij gasped:
“The port market! There’s a storage room!”

The squad sprinted, leaving blood and corpses behind. A final turn—and they stumbled into the desolate square of the old port market. Panting. Empty magazines clattering to the ground.

Vasilij slumped onto a broken counter, teeth gritted. His face was ashen, hands shaking.

“We’re… almost there…”

Cole nodded to Anton:
“Patch him up.”

A morphine syringe. Bandages soaked in blood but holding.

“How do you feel?” Anton patted Vasilij’s shoulder.

The old man groaned:

“Like shit… We were so close…”

Cole crouched beside him:
“But we’re still alive.”

Vasilij suddenly shuddered, fumbled in his pocket.
“Major… for you…”

From his grimy pants, he pulled a scratched old recorder and a note stained with something dark. Cole examined them.

“You looted the bodies?”

Vasilij smirked weakly:
“No food… no survival… Thought I’d find ammo…”

“Thanks, Vasilij.” Cole tucked the items away. “I’ll check later.”

The old man stood, leaning on Cole:
“We’re almost there.”

THE MARKET.

Once bustling—now a dead zone. Shattered storefronts. Overturned stalls. Vasilij led them through the wreckage, muttering:

“Knew a guy… called ‘Judge’… had a shop here…”

He stopped at a rusted door with a keypad.

“Had a safe room… for emergencies.”

A sly glint in his eye.

“Think we’ll need it.”

The hardware store “Radiowave” was a graveyard of destruction. Shelves toppled, glass cases shattered. A heavy metal door stood at the back, buried under debris.

Above it, a faded Playboy pin-up—her smile sun-bleached, eyes burned out by cigarettes.

“You’re naive, old man,” Jarek spat. “Think nobody’s cracked this yet?”

Vasilij ignored him, wiping dust off the keypad.

“Doubt he got to use his stash.”

Thiery adjusted his glasses:
“Hope you know the code.”

Vasilij closed his eyes, humming:
“Pleasure, little treasure…”

His fingers moved—7-5-3-2-7-8-7-3.

A click. The door groaned open.

Anton whistled:
“Judge stocked up well.”

The room was packed—guns, ammo, medkits, canned food. A doomsday arsenal.

Vasilij sighed:
“When the city went mad, people prepared. Few lived to use it.”

Cole reloaded, assessing their haul.
“Good. We’ll need this.”

A metallic clack—Vasilij reloaded a Magnum, hands steady despite the tremor.

Cole watched him.
“Hope you know how to use that.”

The cylinder snapped shut.
“Count on it.”

Then—a cough. Wet, ragged. Muttering, drunken, dying. The squad froze.

“We’re not alone.” Cole raised a hand—check it.

Jarek and Seamus moved toward the rubble.

A step. Another. A HOWL.

The wall exploded inward.

“FALL BACK! OUTSIDE—NOW!”

They stumbled into the square as dust settled.

And it emerged.

A twisted body, joints bent wrong. A neck swollen with pulsating cysts oozing sludge. A face—burned, skin sloughing off, revealing yellowed teeth and fish-like, rotting eyes.

No left arm. The right—a bloated club, twice the size of its torso, skin split open to reveal nails, screws, glass shards embedded in flesh.

A living bludgeon. A mutation’s weapon.

“Dear God…” Vasilij recoiled.

“FIRE!”

Bullets tore into its hide—too thick, too tough.

Judge roared, swung. Anton and Seamus barely dodged—the club smashed a counter to splinters.

Jarek fired first, buckshot slamming into its back.

But Judge turned. His cysts burst—six insectoid horrors launched out, toothy maws snapping.

“Cover us, boys!”

One latched onto Jarek—he bashed its teeth out, gutted it with a knife.

Another bit Vasilij. The old man screamed, tore it off, left a gash on his arm. He put a bullet in its head.

Two more attacked Cole and Thiery.

“Don’t let up!”

Judge staggered, fell to his knees.

Seamus emptied his magazine—click. Empty.

“Shit!”

Seamus fumbled for a fresh magazine—dropped it.
That one second was all Judge needed.

The mutant lunged. Its bludgeon-arm whistled through the air—CRACK! Ribs shattered. Tartakovsky collapsed, his rifle clattering to the ground.

Judge stomped down, hammering the club-arm again. And again. Blood sprayed.

“SEAMUS!”

“FIRE! FUCKING FIRE!”

A storm of bullets ripped into Judge. Rounds tore through its hide, chipping away the chitinous armor. It staggered, drunk on pain, black sludge—mixed with something like blood—gushing from its maw.

One final burst—Judge collapsed, crashing beside Seamus’ body like Death itself settling next to its prize.

Vasilij stepped forward. His face was stone.

“Rot in hell, bastard.”

A .44 Magnum roared. The round punched through Judge's eye, blew out the back of its skull in a shower of bone fragments.

The creature twitched—then lay still.

"Anton—check Seamus! NOW!"

The medic rushed over. A second later, his shoulders slumped.

"Major… He's gone."

Tartakovsky's body was broken. Ribs jutted through his vest. His face—a pulp. One intact eye stared blankly, frozen in final surprise.

Silence draped over them like a shroud.

Cole stood over the corpse, jaw clenched. Only the faint tremor in his hands betrayed the fury beneath. He took out his field journal and recorded the date and time of death.

"19:30."

Cole turned away sharply—as if one more second would unleash the storm inside.

"Any leads on the rest of 'Alpha'?"

Vasilij wiped bloodied hands on his pants.

"There's a bunker. Cold War relic. If anyone's alive—they're there."

"How far?"

"Through the metro line. But…" He eyed the others. "The districts around it are ruins. Or crawling with those things. Shortest path's through the cemetery woods."

Anton smirked darkly, finger resting on his rifle's trigger:

"Choices are shit. Get lost in the woods… or eaten."

"I know these woods," Vasilij snapped. "I'll guide you."

Cole exhaled.

"Five minutes. Gear check. Then we move."

His gaze lingered on Seamus' mangled body. This time, he didn't look away.

The storage room stank of dust, gun oil, and death.

Cole hefted the flamethrower—cold, heavy, lethal. His fingers traced the rough metal, checking hose connections.

“Take it.” His voice was hollow, like gravel underfoot. He thrust the weapon at Thiery without meeting his eyes. “Burn Seamus.”

Thiery froze. His scientist’s mind raced for alternatives: “But Major, perhaps we could—”

“That’s an order.” Cole’s glare was steel. “No time for ceremonies. Or graves.”

A silent nod. Thiery’s hands shook as he hooked up the fuel tank. Stepping back, he crossed himself.

“Au revoir, mon ami.”

The inferno erupted with a hissing roar. Flame engulfed Seamus’ body, flesh blackening, curling to ash. The stench of burning meat mixed with acrid smoke.

Thiery stood rigid—his face twisted not from heat, but from the horror of what he’d just done.

The October woods greeted them with a grave’s chill.

Bare branches wove overhead like a giant’s skeleton. Every crunch of dead leaves echoed too loud in the suffocating silence.

Cole and Anton took point, rifles ready. Vasilij carried Seamus’ pack—a burden too sacred to discard. Jarek and Thiery covered the rear, scanning every shadow.

“God, I’d kill for coffee…” Anton’s joke fell flat, voice cracking.

“Don’t jinx it.” Cole didn’t turn.

“Hey, ‘Susa-nin’,” Jarek smirked at Vasilij. “How long’s this detour?”

“We’re close. But…” The old man stiffened. “Strange. I expected… trouble here.”

“You too—shut it.” Cole’s tone was weary, not angry.

The trees parted, revealing a graveyard of machinery. Rusted husks. Shattered crates. A warzone’s aftermath.

And there—a downed Mi-24.

Its fuselage was split, rotors snapped. The cockpit—dark as an empty eye socket. It had hit the ground so hard it plowed a trench through the earth.

“Holy shit…” Anton froze.

Thiery edged closer, glasses reflecting the wreck. “No bodies. No signs of a fight.”

The forest fell dead silent. Even the wind stilled.

Cole raised a fist—halt. Something was wrong.

“Ovitz. Check it.”

Jarek hesitated. “Maybe the Professor—”

“Not a request, soldier.” Cole’s voice cut like a blade.

Thiery was already moving, scientific curiosity overriding caution. “Corrosion… but not natural. Almost… biological decay.”

Jarek peered into the cockpit—

A corpse.

Desiccated. Covered in a pulsating, living film—not mold. Not moss. Something worse.

Then—it twitched.

“What the FUCK?!” Jarek stumbled back, raising his shotgun.

The helicopter shuddered. Metal groaned, bending from within.

The cockpit began detaching—not from impact.

Slow. Purposeful. Like a limb tearing free.

“First time I’ve seen a crash decide to fall apart,” Cole muttered, finger on the trigger.

“Nobody move,” Jarek hissed, backpedaling.

The cockpit changed shape.

Tendrils. Long, flexible, sheathed in metallic scales. Clawed tips—like a raptor’s. The front split open, revealing a maw lined with razor teeth.

The hull cracked apart, sloughing off to expose red, glistening flesh veined with green luminescence.

The creature uncoiled from the wreck—a fusion of machine and nightmare.

“It’s alive,” Thiery whispered. “A cybernetic organism…?”

The abomination turned its new "head" toward them. No eyes. Just a mouth. And the click of claws on soil. It knew where they were.

The Mi-24’s frame melted, twisted, fused with the mutant’s body—as if the helicopter had been consumed from within.

But the worst part?

The pilot.

His face was merged with the dashboard. Wires burrowed into his skin. Tubes jutted from his ruptured chest.

“So this fucker’s alive,” Jarek breathed. “And really not happy to see us.”

The pilot jerked. Moaned. The maw beneath the cockpit unhinged, revealing rows of rusted, jagged teeth. And the M197 Gatling gun embedded in its chin—began to spin. Slow. Hungry.

“OH SHI—”

“COVER! NOW!”

The world erupted in gunfire. Trees exploded. Dirt geysered. Vasilij pressed into a stump, hands clamped over his ears—but the sound was everywhere, vibrating in bones, teeth, soul.

Anton and Ovitz pressed against a thick tree trunk, feeling each burst punch fist-sized holes through the wood. One more second—and the bullets would tear through them instead.

Then—silence. The Gatling stopped.

Ovitz peeked out.

The monster had frozen. But inside the cockpit, the pilot convulsed—fingers gripping controls, lips moving soundlessly. Then—

A roar. Metallic. Like train brakes screeching.

The creature lurched forward, claws gouging trenches in the earth.

Straight toward Vasilij’s hiding spot.

"Gotta kill the pilot," Ovitz hissed to Anton. "He’s controlling that thing."

Anton nodded, watching the abomination advance. Vasilij curled tighter behind his stump—breaths shallow, fingers clawing dirt. The monster’s mechanical joints clicked a meter away.

"Wait…" Anton whispered. "Let it pass. We’ll hit its rear."

One step. Another.

"NOW!"

They lunged from cover, rifles up—BAM-BAM-BAM! Bullets ricocheted off the armored cockpit glass, leaving only white scratches.

The pilot’s head snapped toward them.

His eyes locked with Ovitz’s.

The Gatling spun up.

The forest erupted.

Anton dove, tackling Vasilij behind cover as their former hiding place disintegrated in a storm of bullets. Bark shrapnel rained down.

"MOVE!"

Ovitz sprinted toward Cole, who crouched behind the Mi-24's wreckage.

"You thought an AK would drop that thing?!" Cole snarled, slamming in a fresh mag.

Jarek fired steadily, tracking the monster as it dragged itself closer, claws rending soil.

"Need heavier firepower. What've we got?"

Cole yanked open his pack:

"Eight RGD-5 grenades. Won't pierce its armor."

Ovitz squinted at the beast. "Don't need to." He pointed at the cockpit glass, glinting through smoke. "Shatter that—toss a grenade down its throat."

Thiery's gaze darted across the battlefield—then froze.

An FGM-300 rocket launcher.

"Nom de Dieu…" He breathed. "These were decommissioned…"

But two rockets remained.

The plan crystallized instantly. He adjusted the flamethrower's nozzle, maximizing range.

Then—leaped out.

"Pour toi, monstre!"

A firestorm engulfed the creature's face. Flames licked armor, seeped into seams, burned the pilot's eyes.

The monster thrashed—blinded, immobilized.

"Trantigne, what's your play?!" Cole's voice cut through the chaos.

"Rocket launcher—NOW!" Thiery roared, nodding toward the weapon. "Red and green wires—cross them!"

The flamethrower sputtered—out of fuel.

"Merde…"

The beast, now smoke-blackened, swung blindly—its cockpit glass charred opaque.

Jarek was already at the launcher, smashing its panel open with his rifle butt. Four wires inside: blue, green, red, yellow.

"Which fucking ones?!"

"Green, Ovitz!" Thiery shouted.

"No shit, Sherlock!" Jarek snarled, splicing the wires. A high-pitched whine built—

BOOM!

The rocket streaked out, punching through the creature's chitinous flank. Flesh and metal burst outward. The beast reeled—cockpit glass shattering.

Cole moved. A grenade arced perfectly into the gaping maw.

KABOOM!

The cockpit detonated from within, molten armor dripping like wax.

"GO! GO!" Cole hauled Vasilij up as secondary explosions rocked the wreck. They ran—forest whipping past—until a final blast-wave hurled them forward.

The cemetery gates loomed—rusted iron tangled with barbed wire. Salvation or trap.

Anton tripped over something soft.

"Oh… fuck…"

A corpse. Fresh. Gutted. Intestines spilled from a torn abdomen. Face unrecognizable.

"One of ours?" Thiery adjusted his glasses, avoiding the gore.

Jarek kicked a nearby looted backpack. "Marauder. Got what he deserved."

Cole rummaged through the bag—found revolver rounds. Six in a box, three loose. "Better than nothing."

Behind them, the forest howled. Not wind. Not animals. Something worse.

"Move. Fast." Cole nodded at the corpse. "Unless you want to join him."

Metropolis Station swallowed them whole.

Before descending into the subway, Thiery redistributed the load—the flamethrower now dangled behind the old man's back, leaving his hands free for the rifle.

Darkness thick as oil. Flashlights trembled over shattered tiles, shredded posters, black stains on walls.

"Clear," Jarek muttered—but Cole didn't relax.

Too quiet.

He rigged explosives at the entrance. "Rearguard."

The escalator—frozen, skeletal—descended into void. Each step creaked like a dying breath.

Then—the walls. Pulsing. Alive.

A hive.

Thiery's breath hitched. "My God… it's an infestation…"

Jarek's light traced the organic resin coating every surface—veined, breathing. Cocoons bulged within.

"Question is," he growled, "where's the queen?"

The air turned thick—reeking of rot and chemicals. Vasilij shook, revolver clutched in blanched knuckles.

"Oh God… oh God…"
Cole felt cold sweat trickle down his spine, but his voice remained steel:

"Hold formation."

He wasn't sure it would work. But if they panicked—they were dead.

"Eyes sharp. Move quiet. Forward."

The cocoons… They pulsed. Squirmed. Something scratched inside, desperate to get out.

Jarek's finger hovered over his shotgun's trigger.

"Let me just—"

"Hold fire!" Cole hissed.

Then—the tunnel shook.

First, a tremor. Distant. Then stronger. Walls groaned. Dust rained from the ceiling.

"Something's… coming…" Anton pressed against the wall, voice cracking.

Jarek spun—his shotgun aimed at a gap in the tiles.

"Movement in the breach!"

A sound. A growl. But not animal. Not human.

Something in between— a woman's voice, shredded, spliced with cicada clicks and fly-buzz.

A hand emerged from the gap. Human—but too long. Fingers—bony, tipped with black claws. A second hand gripped the edge—and tore the wall open.

Then—She crawled out.

Her head still vaguely feminine—but the eyes… Too many. Faceted. Glittering like shattered glass. Her mouth—stretched too wide, teeth needle-sharp. Lower jaw still forming—new fangs ruptured through bleeding gums.

Her body— upper half humanoid, skin gray, plated with chitin. Abdomen— fully insect, swollen, segmented. Legs— jointed, spiked, piercing concrete. Wings—small, larval, trembling.

She vibrated her throat— that same chittering hiss.

"Home…"

Jarek mouthed soundlessly:

"What the fuck…"

Cole slowly backed the team behind a pillar.

"Steady…" he breathed. "She's blind in this light—"

The Fly Queen turned. Her eyes flickered— tracking movement. She sniffed. Then—stepped forward. Behind Vasilij—a crunch. The old man turned. A cocoon split open. A larva spilled out. Half-baby, half-maggot. Bald skull slick with mucus. Faceless eyes. A mouth—rows of tiny teeth. It screeched— nails on glass.

Vasilij fired. The larva burst— yellow slime spraying.

"You senile bastard!" Jarek snarled—

The Fly Queen ROARED. Walls shook. She charged— smashing barriers like paper.

"FALL BACK! FULL AUTO!"

Bullets pounded her chitin—useless. She screeched— a call. The cocoons ruptured. Hundreds.

Larvae poured out—skittering, shrieking, a tidal wave of teeth.

Jarek's shotgun boomed— blowing apart the front line.

"She's calling the whole fucking nest!"

The tunnel vibrated— a sea of chitin surged from every crack.

"THERE!" Thiery pointed to a service tunnel.

Jarek hesitated: "Dead end?"

"Worse here!" Thiery lobbed a grenade— the blast vaporized a dozen larvae. They ran— squeezing through the narrow passage. Walls alive with squirming young. Ahead—a derailed train car blocked the path. A fire escape ladder leaned nearby.

"Over! NOW!"

Cole covered them—Jarek last. His shotgun clicked. Empty.

"FUCK!" He reloaded—one shell left. The swarm was a meter away.

"JAREK! MOVE!"

Cole yanked him back—claws grazed air where his head had been.
The Fly Queen crawled from the ruptured wall, her tattered wings quivering with rage. Faceted eyes glittered in the dark, tracking every move.

A fresh brood swarmed at her feet.

"This bitch just doesn't quit," Cole spat, leaping off the train car.

Suppressing fire— Cole, Anton, and Thiery unloaded, aiming for eye clusters, chitin seams. Flanking maneuver— Cole and Thiery tried circling behind, using derailed cars as cover. The STINGER lashed out— venomous barb missed their heads by inches as they dove.

Anton scanned the tunnel—walls closing in, exits blocked.

"We're trapped!"

"Then we BLEED them!" Jarek emptied his last magazine, then drew his combat knife.

The blade flashed in the dim light. The Fly Queen hissed, reared up on hind legs—wings flaring for the final lunge. Cole primed a grenade.

"DOWN!"

The explosion rocked the tunnel. Darkness mixed with screams, hisses, the crack of splitting chitin.

Jarek stood his ground. Legs braced. Knife whistling through air like a scythe.

"Who's first?!" he roared.

He didn't retreat. He didn't hide. He slashed— as if trying to cleave the darkness itself.

Larvae surged in waves—he met each with a brutal stroke.

Down. Diagonal. Up.

Guts and slime splattered the walls, his face, his mouth. He spat. Laughed. Kept cutting.

"COME ON, YOU FUCKS! I'M RIGHT HERE!"

Vasilij knelt, eyes bulging, darting wildly.

"Oh God… merciful Lord… we're… all… gonna die!"

Cole grabbed his collar, yanked him nose-to-nose.

"PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER! NOW!"

But the old man wasn't listening. His mind drowned in panic.

"WE'RE DOOMED!!!"

He shoved Cole away—

Three larvae latched onto the major's legs.

"Vasilij—HELP ME!"

But the old man was already running. Screaming. Wailing like a child in a nightmare.

"STOP! GODDAMMIT!"

Cole reached— fingers grazed air. Then—the screams. Long. Piercing. Cut short. Cole clenched his teeth. One larva bit his shoulder. Another dug into his thigh.

PAIN. RAGE.

He grabbed a broken brick—SMASHED the larva's skull. CRUNCH. It went limp— but the blow reopened his wound. Blood. Agony. He kept fighting.

"Thiery—FLAMETHROWER?!" Anton fired one-handed, his other arm dangling, shredded.

"the old man had a flamethrower! Where is—?"

Cole didn't look up.

"Gone."

ACID SPRAY hit Anton's vest—hissing like frying bacon.

"AAARGH!"

He thrashed, tearing at the melting Kevlar—but the molten polymer fused to his skin. Thiery lunged, ripped the armor off with bare hands— his palms blistering from the heat. Anton collapsed. Chest—a ruin of burns. Face—blinded by toxic smoke.

"MEDIC DOWN!" Thiery howled, spraying bullets at the Fly Queen.

Rounds chipped her carapace—not enough. She screeched— retreating but not defeated.

Cole and Jarek dragged Anton up. The wounded man clutched Cole's sleeve with bloody fingers.

"I'll… distract them…" he gurgled, coughing red foam. "Me… or all of us…"
Cole froze. Tactical calculus: Anton won't make it. Wounds—fatal. The squad won't survive another assault. A sacrifice play. The decision hit like a gut-punch.

Silently, Cole pressed two grenades and a napalm canister into Anton's hands. A nod. Approval. Goodbye. "HEY, SHITHEAD!" Anton staggered upright. "OVER HERE! COME GET SOME!"

A pistol shot— bullet ricocheting off the Fly Queen's forehead. It worked.

She screeched, whirled. Behind her—a tide of clicking, drooling young. They swarmed him.
Thiery, backpedaling, spotted a steel door down the tunnel—"Service Access" faded on its surface.

"THERE! GO!"

Anton leaned against the wall, blood pooling at his boots.

"Cole…" His voice—hoarse but steady. "RUN."

The Fly Queen lunged— her bladed forelegs IMPALING his abdomen. Anton grunted— but didn't scream. Instead—he pulled the pins. Grenades clattered beneath her thorax.

"Well, bitch…" He spat blood into her faceted eyes. "At least I made you shit yourself proper."

The fireball ERUPTED—

Mixing chitin, flesh, and concrete into hell's stew. The shockwave hurled the squad off their feet. Cole ate dirt, arms shielding his head. Chunks of ceiling rained down. Then—silence.

Cole rose, ears ringing.

The dim bulb swayed from the ceiling, casting dancing shadows across the two motionless bodies—Jarek and Thiery. Cole rolled onto his back, staring into the darkness they'd fled from. Now just a wall of rubble remained. Anton wouldn't be coming. No one would.

Dust settled slowly, veiling the air in gray. Cole braced against the wall, hauling himself up—his face caked in grime and blood.

"Sound off." His voice was a ragged cough.

From the darkness:

"Alive..." Jarek crouched by the railing, fingers trembling.

"I... cough... too..." Thiery tried standing, but his legs buckled.

Cole exhaled hard:

"Good."

Then—Jarek exploded.

"GOOD?!" His shout shattered the silence like gunfire. "FUCKING GOOD?! IS THIS GOOD TO YOU?!"

He surged up, face twisted with rage.

"I'M DONE! DONE WITH THIS SHIT!"

Thiery reached out: "Ovitz, please—"

Jarek whirled on him. "I'LL CALM YOU, FROG-EATING FUCK! I'LL CALM ALL OF YOU!"

He lunged at Cole, slamming him against the wall.

"Stand down! That's an order!" Cole strained against his grip.

"FUCK YOUR ORDERS!" Jarek screamed, spittle flying. "WE'VE LOST FOUR! FOUR, GODDAMN IT! SEAMUS! ANTON! MARK! THAT FUCKING OLD MAN! ALL DEAD! PIERDOLĘ WAS WSZYSTKICH W PYSK!"

His voice broke into a rasp.

"ONE MORE FIGHT LIKE THIS, AND THERE'LL BE NO ONE LEFT TO FOLLOW YOUR ORDERS!"

Suddenly—he collapsed. Hands clawing his skull.

Thiery stood frozen. His scientific mind scrabbled for logic, for reason—finding none.

Cole slid down the wall, wiping his face. After a tomb’s silence, he spoke first:

"Alright... We'll call base. Request extraction."

Thiery shook his head, voice shaking: "We... can't get signal down here."

Cole moved to the peeling metro map. His soot-blackened finger traced the tunnels, stopping at a red house icon.

"We're here. Bunker's close."

Jarek flexed his cramping hands. Fury still smoldered in his eyes. "How?"

Cole tapped the route: "Service ladder to the collector. Follow it to the metro line. Straight to the bunker."

Jarek cracked his knuckles—a threat in the sound. "Fine. But she better be there. Or else—"

He didn’t finish. His fists did.

Gear Check:
Cole: SA-82 assault rifle (4 mags), Combat knife,
Pistol (5 mags), Damaged radio (unstable comms)

Jarek: Hunting knife, Empty shotgun, Pistol (5 mags), Last frag grenade, Jammed sniper rifle (10 rounds)

Thiery: SA-82 (2 mags), Pistol (3 mags), Damaged analyzer (functional), stun grenade, Anton’s medkit

Thiery adjusted his fogged glasses—"EM interference is still strong. Radios are useless."

Cole slapped his last mag into place. "Then we’re on our own."

Jarek stretched his neck. "Let’s fucking go already."

The Collector
Black water sloshed under their boots, reeking of rot. Flashlights cut through the gloom, revealing cracked tiles and something scuttling just beyond the light.

Cole led, SA-82 ready. Every drip, every whisper of movement set his teeth on edge.

Thiery bit his lip, glasses steamed. The science was gone—only primal fear remained.

Jarek covered the rear, finger glued to his trigger.

At a junction, Cole checked the map—

BANG!

A shot rang out. The bullet ricocheted—slamming into Jarek’s chest plate. He fell backward, water spraying.

"CONTACT!" Cole and Thiery dove for cover.

"WHERE?!" Thiery hissed.

Jarek gasped on the ground, clutching his ribs. "SON OF A—"

Another shot. Closer. From the darkness ahead—a silhouette.

Human. Holding a rifle.

Cole and Thiery instantly scattered, pressing themselves against the walls.

- Who fired?! - Cole shouted, aiming into the darkness.

Thiery squinted, finger hovering over the trigger—but stopped just in time.

From behind the rusted, slime-coated pipes came a trembling but furious voice:

"You fucking bastards think you got me? Eat this!"

Another shot. A miss.

"Major—that's human!" Thiery whispered.

Cole slowly lowered his rifle.

"Cease fire! Friendlies!"

Only a ragged, labored breath answered.

"Go fuck yourself!" The voice was frayed, exhausted.

Cole stepped forward, hands raised.

"Identify yourself."

Silence. Then—movement. A figure emerged from the pipes: gaunt, shaking, a pistol clutched in unsteady hands.

"Joan... Joan McFadden."

Cole kept his hands visible. Water dripped down his face, mixing with sweat.

"Major Cole Sullivan, Beta Team lead. Stand down."

When Joan stepped fully into the light, his chest tightened. Her pistol trembled. Eyes—wide, feral with terror—darted between them. Her uniform was caked in filth, blood crusted on her cheek. Every movement screamed starvation.

"We're human. Just like you. We're here to extract you."

A beat of silence. Then—the pistol splashed into the water. Her expression shattered into raw, painful hope.

"Thank God..." Her legs buckled.

Cole lunged—but she was already collapsing, sinking into the black water like a ghost returning to the depths.

Thiery rushed to help, but Cole was closer. Ammonia capsules cracked under his fingers. The sharp stench jolted Joan awake—gagging, tears streaming, but alive.

"You’re safe now." Kneeling beside her, the icy water soaked into his knees.

Suddenly—Joan clung to him. Her grip was vise-tight, body shaking with sobs. Hot tears seeped into his vest. Cole hesitated—then awkwardly patted her back.

"Let’s get you out of here."

"Fucking finally," Jarek muttered, wiping grime from his face. Joan’s face was a map of suffering:
Hollow cheeks, Claw marks (four parallel scars), Lips chapped raw

When she spoke, her voice rasped:

"We need to talk. My hideout’s close."

She tried standing—failed. Cole hauled her up, noticing how her eyes locked on the tunnels behind them.

"We’ve got you."

But even as he said it—something prickled his spine.

Something’s still out there.

The Boiler Room. The rusted metal door groaned open, revealing a cavernous space. Heat blasted from a rumbling furnace.

Signs of desperate survival:

A frayed sleeping bag, Canned food cooked in empty tins,
Walls covered in scrawled notes (dates, numbers, fragmented thoughts)

Jarek slammed the door shut, throwing the bolt.

"Cozy." He kicked a dented gas canister. "Thought you’d be in the bunker."

Joan’s laugh held no humor.
"Five-star accommodations were... occupied." She massaged her aching shoulder.. "Had to improvise."

Cole leaned his rifle against the wall.

"At ease. Rest up." His backpack hit the floor—dust swirling. "Joan—we need answers."

Debrief.
Joan lit a cigarette with shaky hands. The flame highlighted her sunken eyes.

"Alpha Team. Four of us. One week ago." Smoke curled around her words. "Mission: locate infection source, collect data, exfil."

A bitter chuckle.

"We had no idea."

She tapped ash onto the floor.

"At first—quiet. Just a dead city. Then we found the lab." Her voice dropped. "Walls... clawed from the inside."

From her pack—a charred folder. Bloodstained pages.

Cole flipped through:

Genetic schematics

Photos of something that used to be human

Formulas with redacted headings

"They were splicing people with... something." Joan massaged her temples. "I couldn't decipher it. Not after..."

Cole studied a DNA diagram—abnormal branches where none should exist.

"Did you contact base?"

"Jammed. Not static—targeted. We tried moving to extraction on foot."

Her cigarette trembled.

"Then we met them."

A long drag.

"You've seen the creatures. They're not animals." Her nail traced her claw scars. "They hunt. Set traps."

Cole nodded grimly. They knew.

"At first we held them off. Then... others appeared."

She stubbed out the cigarette violently.
"Kristensen said the sewers were safer." Joan's cigarette trembled. "He was wrong."

Something scratched in the darkness. Everyone froze.

"Leif and Giancarlo died in front of me." Ash fell from her cigarette. "One of those... invisible things... tore Trotti in half. Like he was paper."

Cole and Jarek exchanged glances.

The smoke coiled in the damp air, mixing with mold and blood. Joan took a final drag—the ember lighting her hollow cheeks—before crushing it against a pipe.

Cole studied the folder. The pages felt clammy. One phrase stood out:

"Subject SRPNT-9: Active camouflage. Instability phase—74%."

"If they can do that too—" He didn't finish. He didn't need to.

Joan stood abruptly, shaking off the numbness.

"You look like hell." Her hands jerked as she rummaged through her medkit.

Cole wordlessly unzipped his jacket, revealing a jagged bite wound. The edges were already bruising blue.

"This'll sting." Joan dabbed antiseptic. Cole inhaled sharply—but made no sound.

"Read your Germany op-report." He gritted through the pain. "You saved ten men."

A humorless smirk. "Liked fixing broken toys as a kid. Old habit."

Her hands—shaking but precise—pulled the needle through his flesh.

"Don't even wanna know what chewed you up," she muttered.

Jarek snorted by the stove, his laugh like a gunshot.

"Giant fucking fly. With puppies the size of Dobermans."

Cole stayed silent. Fresh stitches pulled with every clenched fist. Somewhere in those tunnels—their dead remained.

"Anton stayed behind." His voice cracked. "Brought the tunnel down on them... and himself."

Anton's face flashed in his mind— with that half-smile he'd never finish.

Thirty years old. Whole life ahead. Now—gone.

Cole shut his eyes.

"Started the day with six..."

The needle paused. "My condolences," Joan whispered. She knew that cost too well.

Jarek patted his pockets, then cursed.

"Matches were in that crazy old man's pack."

His eyes landed on Joan.

"Lady—got a light for an old soldier?" Exhaustion edged his usual sarcasm.

Joan tossed him her lighter—the same one she'd sterilized the needle with.

Jarek caught it, nodded thanks, then pried open a dented can.

"Bread and water—no hunger," he muttered in Polish, stabbing the lid.

Joan tied off Cole's stitches.

"How's it feel?"

He tested his shoulder. "Better."

From Anton's blood-crusted medkit, she grabbed iodine and bandages.

Thiery sat slumped against the wall—fingers drumming, eyes empty.

His mind spiraled:

I'm a scientist. Not a soldier. I shouldn't be here—shooting things that defy biology!

"No... not a soldier... Je ne suis pas soldat …"

Joan crouched beside him.

"Mr. Trantigne—let me check you."

She pressed fingers to his wrist. His pulse rabbited.

"Describe your symptoms."

Thiery swallowed.

"Chills... everywhere. Did I catch something from those—?"

His teeth chattered. The flashlight's swaying light made shadows dance like the things in the tunnels.

Joan tilted his chin up, examining his dilated pupils.

"Seen this before." Her voice softened. "Combat stress."

A beat.

"You're not military."

Thiery shook his head.

"No... Lead chemist. Onirique Industries."

A flashback:

White lab walls. The acid-green glow of a breakthrough serum. His supervisor’s grin: "Thiery—this changes everything!"

Now—filth. Tremors. A needle’s burn as Joan administered sedatives.

"Should’ve stayed a lab rat..."

She smiled—sad but kind.
"Well, I guess you won’t be collecting your pension anytime soon."

Her joke was light, but the weight behind it was real. She’d seen men like him before—scientists, engineers, doctors—those who thought they understood hell until they stared into its maw.

"Hey, when’s my turn?" Jarek’s voice cut through the damp air from across the room. He lounged like a king on a crate, mouth half-full of canned meat, his usual smirk plastered across his face. "In case you missed it, my leg’s damn near broken!" He swallowed theatrically, wincing for effect, but the fire in his eyes betrayed his act.

Joan sighed, pushing herself up with a grunt.

"In order of severity, Pan Ovitz."

She didn’t like him. Crude. Tactless. Too convinced of his own invincibility. But he was part of the unit. Without him, they’d already be dead.

Thiery took a deep breath, color slowly returning to his ashen face.

"Ah... yes. I feel better."

Joan gave his shoulder a brief, almost maternal pat.

"Stay that way."

Then she turned to Jarek, unspooling a roll of bandages with deliberate slowness.

"Alright, hero. Let’s see this ‘broken’ leg of yours."

Jarek scoffed but obediently stretched out his leg. His usual cocky grin twisted into a grimace as fabric peeled away from the wound. His right calf was a mess—shredded skin above the knee, dark blood oozing sluggishly, mixing with the grimy water pooling on the floor.

Joan knelt before him, her fingers—strangely delicate for a field medic—probing the injury with clinical precision.

"Christ, woman, quit babying me!" Jarek jerked when her touch found a particularly tender spot. "Or what, you think I’m some wounded pup?"

She didn’t even look up. "If you acted like a grown man instead of a spoiled brat, I wouldn’t have to." Her voice was flat, but the irritation simmered beneath.

With a sharp tug, she tightened the tourniquet.

"Agh—FUCK! You did that on purpose!"

"Yes." She poured antiseptic over the wound without ceremony. The liquid foamed pink as it hit raw flesh. "If I don't clean this properly, you'll have gangrene by dawn. Want me to saw it off with a rusty blade? No anesthesia. Or would you prefer to die like an idiot, screaming as sepsis burns through your veins?"

Thiery, watching from the sidelines, choked back a laugh, disguising it as a cough. Cole stood by the doorway, his face a mask of weary stoicism, though the creases at his eyes betrayed his exhaustion.

Jarek gritted his teeth. "I'll saw it off myself, you harpy! Who the hell do you think—"

"I'm the only medic within twenty klicks." She yanked the bandage tight enough to steal his breath. "Call me 'harpy' again, and I'll pour iodine straight into your eyeball."

Silence. Even the dripping water outside seemed to pause.

Jarek glowered at his freshly wrapped leg, then at Joan, who was already packing her supplies with deliberate calm.

"Well, hero?" She finally met his gaze. "More whining? Or a 'thank you' like a civilized person?"

For a second, his jaw worked—then, unexpectedly, split into that infuriating grin.

"Thanks, sister. But if you think this means I owe you—"

"Shut up, Ovitz," Cole and Thiery said in unison.

Joan just shook her head and walked away, leaving Jarek to his smirking. Somewhere in the tunnels beyond, something metallic scraped—a distant, echoing sound no one bothered to acknowledge.

Cole's Investigation

Cole took a final drag of his cigarette, the smoke burning like acid in his lungs. Ash crumbled onto the filthy floor, mixing with dirt and dried blood. He rubbed his neck—muscles taut from days of tension.

Before him lay the folder Joan had handed over—Project Life—its edges frayed, pages stained with things he didn't care to identify.

Lamarr's gonna pay for this. The image of driving his fist into the general's smug face flashed behind his eyes. Lied. Covered it up. Sent us in blind.

He crushed the cigarette against the wall, leaving a black smudge on the peeling paint, then flipped a wooden crate into a makeshift table. The folder's contents spilled out—dog-eared reports, blurred photographs. Next to them, the old recorder from the dying man. Instead of the expected hard drive, there was a pile of paper. Someone was so afraid of leaks that they rejected all their advanced technology. They hid the results of their discoveries in an archaic, fragile, but hack-proof form. So, there was something in those papers that was worth dying for. Fragments of a nightmare, pieced together.

Blacked-out truths. The first pages were censored with heavy marker—entire paragraphs redacted, leaving only fragments:

"Subject... exposed to... data suggests..."

Useless. Just the ghosts of secrets someone had tried to erase.

Further in, handwritten notes—scrawled in frantic script, as if penned under duress:

17.06.35 — Subject BT-6200 — Transformation unstable. Correlation with meteor fragment?

"They thought they controlled evolution... but the meteor predates civilization."

Cole frowned. Who's "they"? The mutants? Or something else?
Not a virus, then. Alien bio-weapon?

A surveillance photo: Grainy, but unmistakable—a man in his forties standing among white-coated scientists. The face was blurred, but... familiar.

Where have I seen him?

A torn note beside it:

"Wells Machine metrics unstable. Further testing required. At 80% output, anomalies manifest—"

Another photo: A testing chamber, the Wells Machine humming ominously. Figures in hazmat suits lurked in the background.

A report excerpt:

"Test subjects exhibited fusion of organic and metallic matter. Motor functions retained, but CNS degradation occurred within 37 seconds."

Cole's stomach turned. That helicopter... The pilot was fused to the seat. Like they'd been melted together.

And then he remembered something else, from the distant past.

Cole froze, clutching the tattered sheet of paper with the report in his hands. The letters blurred before his eyes, but the phrase "fusion of organic and metallic matter" burned his brain like a red-hot needle.

The Caucasus. One of his colleagues, or rather what was left of him — a bloody mass fused into pieces of scrap metal. Eyes — alive, pleading.

Cole closed his eyes, but the images did not disappear — they dug into his consciousness like those very metal tentacles fusing flesh with iron.
He clenched his teeth.

"Push it back. Into the darkness. Back to where it's been rotting for ten years."

He opened his eyes and began studying the documents in front of him again.

More notes:

"Subject BT-6213... unstable post-exposure... severe physical deformities..."

Then, abruptly—nothing.

Scattered reports:

"Sample displays anomalous regeneration... cellular structure defies known biology..."

"Meteor genome contains non-terrestrial sequences..."

And finally—a photo of the meteor itself. Black, veined with pulsating strands, as if something inside it lived.

Cole pinched the bridge of his nose.

"A fucking meteor. Aliens. What next?" He exhaled hard. Okay, say it's alien. How the hell does that turn men into... those things?

The photographs lay scattered across the table like fragments of a nightmare.

First image: Surgeons in blood-smeared masks bent over an operating table. The thing beneath their scalpels was vaguely humanoid—spine arched at an impossible angle, skin bubbling with pustules that glistened under the surgical lights. One of the doctors held a scalpel near its face—if that distended, toothless maw could even be called a face.

Second image: Machinery. A grotesque fusion of medical equipment and medieval torture devices. Thick tubes snaked into open incisions, wires burrowed under skin, and needles—long as knitting needles—pierced flesh at precise intervals. The subject's mouth was frozen mid-scream.

Third image: Cryo pods. Frosted glass obscured the shapes inside, but the silhouettes were wrong. Too many limbs. Heads too elongated. One hand—or what might've been a hand—pressed against the glass, fingers splayed like a spider's legs.

Cole felt ice slither down his spine.

What kind of hell were they brewing here?

Thiery, who'd been silently observing from the shadows, finally stepped forward. His gaunt face hovered over the documents, eyes darting hungrily across the pages.

"This isn't just a meteorite," he muttered suddenly, jabbing a finger at strange symbols woven between lines of text. "Look—these glyphs. They repeat in the DNA sequences. As if... someone programmed them."

His voice was too loud in the damp stillness.

Jarek, massaging a bruised thigh, glanced up. His brows furrowed as he limped over, peering at the papers over Cole's shoulder.

"Not glyphs," he rasped, squinting. His calloused finger traced the symbols like a blind man reading braille. "Not Cyrillic. Not Latin. Not even fucking cuneiform. But..." His nail paused on one angular character—sharp as fractured crystal. "This one... 'Awakening.' Or 'Rebirth.' And this... 'Threshold'?" He jerked his hand back suddenly, as if burned. "Bastards warped the language."

Thiery's fingers drummed the table. "If this is a message... from who? Who sent the meteor?"

Cole didn't answer. His gaze was locked on the final page—a report titled "First Contact." Amidst dry scientific jargon, one line blazed in red ink:

"Sample exhibits properties inconsistent with terrestrial biology. Crystalline lattice reacts to human DNA. Microscopic structures resemble... mechanisms?"

Mechanisms.

The word hit Cole like a hammer strike.

"So it's... techno-organic?" he growled.

Thiery paled. He stumbled back from the table as if the papers were contagious.

"This is extraterrestrial intervention," he whispered. "We're not dealing with mutation. This is weaponized."

Jarek snorted, racking his pistol's slide with a snick that cut the silence.

"Who gives a shit what they are? Little green men or demons from hell—they all die the same."

Cole pressed play on the tape recorder.

A voice, warped through static, hissed from the speaker:

"...Morozov thinks military funding is viable... We have the theories, but lack resources... They could provide..."

Next clip:

"...if you're hearing this... BT-6213... they did it to me... I can't control the process anymore... I must... end... this..."

Silence.

Questions. No answers. Cole's fists clenched.

Jarek and Thiery drifted away, leaving him alone with the ghosts in those files. It took time to digest.

Cole scrubbed a hand over his face, smearing grime. Meteor. Experiments. Mutations. Fragments of data swirled—molecular diagrams, autopsy photos, cryptic symbols. The puzzle pieces almost fit.

Almost.

He chuckled darkly, rolling his wounded shoulder. The pain was a dull, persistent throb—just bearable enough to ignore. Standing, his joints popped in protest, a reminder: You're not invincible.

A metallic scrape echoed through the walls.

Time to move.

"Alright, folks—break's over." Cole's tone was calm, but exhaustion lurked beneath. "We need surface access. Comms."

He unrolled a soggy metro map across a rusted barrel. The edges were disintegrating, but the tunnel lines remained legible.

"Last attempt failed, but we got an SOS out." His cigarette butt tapped a marked location. Ash smudged the paper. "We came from here."

The butt slid left.

"Now we're here."

"Drainage collector runs under the whole city. We follow it—hit the metro line—surface from there."

Jarek racked his pistol's slide with a clack.

"Sounds like a plan, boss."

Cole smirked. "Congratulations. It is."

The Sewers.
Leaving Joan's hideout plunged them back into the bowels of the city.

The new sector stank worse—rust, stagnant water, and the acrid tang of rat droppings. Rusted pipes coiled along the ceiling like metal intestines, their shadows writhing in the flashlight beams.

They reached a chamber split by inky water, four isolated platforms with retracted walkways between them.

Thiery approached a corroded control panel.

"Should work..."

He yanked the lever. Nothing. Just a dead click.

"Need to restore power," he muttered.

A scuttling sound echoed from the tunnels. Joan pressed against the wall, pale but steady.

"We're not alone."

Cole nodded, raising his rifle.

"Know that."

Jarek's flashlight beam skimmed the water's surface as Thiery pried open the panel with mechanic's precision. The smell of oxidized copper and burnt insulation hung thick.

Cole covered him, gaze scanning the dark.

"Can you do it?"

"Yeah, this should be simple," Thiery muttered under his breath, his fingers working deftly to disconnect the fried wiring. From his pack, he produced a strange device—a hybrid between a multimeter and portable generator, seemingly cobbled together from spare parts. Green LEDs flickered to life like fireflies in the darkness.

The first throw of the switch produced only a weak hum from transformers deep within the station. The bridge remained stubbornly still.

"Damn it." Thiery cranked up the power. The device hissed in protest, but the result was the same. "Not enough juice. We need an auxiliary power source."

His eyes darted to a second control panel on the opposite platform, barely visible through the gloom.

"Got an idea. Someone needs to reach that panel and activate the secondary power feed to this switch."

"Ovitz—move out," Sullivan commanded.

Jarek scowled but approached the narrow, rotting plank bridging the black water of the collector. The wood groaned ominously under his weight, rusted bolts shedding flakes of corrosion into the inky depths below.

"What a fucking fairy-tale bridge," he grumbled, inching forward. Each step sent metallic shrieks echoing through the chamber as the ancient supports protested.

Reaching the platform, Jarek hauled himself up a rickety ladder. The control panel was caked in grime and mold, but the buttons and levers were still discernible beneath the filth.

"Ovitz, what do you see?" Thiery called across the chasm.

"A shitload of buttons and a couple of levers," Jarek replied, wiping the panel clean with his sleeve. "Nothing matching your damn schematics."

His gaze landed on two breaker switches flanking the console. Without hesitation, he yanked both simultaneously.

Somewhere in the bowels of the tunnels, gears ground to life. Motors roared. With a deafening crash, the bridge slammed into position.

Crossing over, the team found themselves facing a narrow passage. Cole entered first, his flashlight cutting through the darkness to reveal walls slick with pulsating mucus. Their footsteps echoed unnaturally, merging with the steady drip-drip of condensation.

Minutes later, they hit a fork.

"Don't fucking say we gotta split up," Jarek growled, sweeping his light between both paths.

"Like hell we will," Sullivan snapped. "So some hybrid can pick us off one by one?"

Choosing the left path, they soon encountered another fork—then another.

"Goddamn it, we're back where we started," Cole snarled, driving his fist into the wall.

"I doubt it's the same spot," Joan ventured cautiously.

"When in doubt, make the sign of the cross," Jarek interjected, pointing to a rusted valve. "Saw this exact hunk of junk earlier."

"In case you missed it, we're in a sewer," Joan shot back. "Everything's the same damn rusted pipe."

The tunnel walls—coated in layers of slime and fungal growth—constricted around them like the intestines of some primordial beast. The ankle-deep water shimmered black and oily, reflecting their trembling flashlight beams like pools of spoiled crude.

"Are we... lost?" Thiery's voice sounded unnaturally loud in the oppressive silence. His flashlight beam danced across the walls, illuminating peeling tiles and corroded pipes. His hands shook—not from cold, but from the creeping certainty they were going in circles.

Cole halted abruptly, his sharp profile etched in the flashlight's glare.

"Not convinced yet," he said, voice deceptively calm—but beneath it thrummed the tension of a coiled spring. "This way."

They pressed on, but their confidence didn't return. Every footstep multiplied into a chorus of echoes, creating a eerie symphony that suggested invisible pursuers. Water sloshed. Boots squeaked. Breathing grew ragged—

Then Cole's arm shot up.

"Quiet!" His whisper cracked like a whip. "Hear that?"

Silence. Then—a new sound. Wet, gurgling respiration interspersed with snuffling. Coming from above.

Joan slowly raised her light—

"Jesus Christ!" Her scream shattered the stillness.

From the ceiling, trailing ropes of putrid slime, it dropped.

A rat. But not just any rat—the size of a large dog, its patchy gray-green hide riddled with weeping sores and fissures. Forelegs elongated grotesquely, ending in rust-colored claws like railroad spikes. Its bald, scabrous head lolled, revealing a mouthful of yellowed, piranha-like teeth. And the eyes— bulbous, bloodshot, brimming with nothing but hunger and madness.

Click-click-click went those teeth.

Jarek's Flashback:
Gdańsk barracks. Night. A young recruit, laughing with comrades as they descend into the cellar—rat hunting. Jokes. Then pain—razor teeth sinking into his forearm. He slams the beast against brick, hears bones crack, but it won't let go. Blood slick between his fingers. A gunshot—someone puts it down. But the feeling of those teeth... he'd never forget.

"Fuck!" Jarek recoiled on instinct, hand flying to his knife.

But Joan was faster. Her pistol roared like thunder in the confined space. The round obliterated half the rat's skull, spraying brain matter across the tunnel. The creature spasmed—a puppet with severed strings—before collapsing into the black water with a sickening splash.

Silence. Only the gunshot's echo lingered, fading into the depths.

Cole crouched, examining the abomination.

"The hell is this? Local wildlife?" His tone was steady, but his fingers tightened around his rifle.

"Took down a few of these bastards already," Joan, leaning against the wall, was breathing heavily.

Jarek let out a derisive snort and nudged a mutilated rat corpse with his boot. The thing's distended belly split open at the touch, spilling half-digested...something onto the tunnel floor. "Looks like they need stronger poison," he remarked, wrinkling his nose at the stench.

A new sound cut through the oppressive silence - the unmistakable screech of claws on concrete, magnified by the tunnel's acoustics. Joan's body went rigid, her trained instincts snapping her upright like a released spring.

"They'll be swarming this location soon," she hissed, her eyes darting to the shadowy recesses above them. "We need to move. Now."

Cole gave a sharp nod, his jaw tightening as he hefted his rifle. "Double time, people! And watch your overheads!"

As predicted, the tunnels soon came alive with nightmarish sounds - the skittering of clawed feet, wet hissing that seemed to come from all directions at once, and the occasional blood-curdling shriek that set teeth on edge. The mutant rats were hunting in force now, their glowing red eyes blinking in and out of existence in the darkness like demonic fireflies.

The team moved in tight formation:

Cole took point, his assault rifle sweeping methodically across potential attack vectors

Joan followed close behind, her last remaining pistol gripped in white-knuckled hands

Thiery and Jarek brought up the rear, moving back-to-back like some grotesque four-legged creature

The narrow service tunnel forced them into single file, their boots making sickening wet sounds in the ankle-deep sewage. The wavering beams of their helmet lights created a disorienting strobe effect, making shadows leap and twist along the slime-coated walls.

The attack came without warning.

A monstrous rat burst from a maintenance hatch directly onto Thiery's back. The scientist screamed as claws dug into his shoulders, the creature's jagged teeth snapping centimeters from his face. For one terrifying moment, its foaming muzzle filled his entire vision before instinct took over.

Something inside the normally reserved researcher finally shattered. All the pent-up terror, grief and madness of the last hellish hours came roaring to the surface in a primal scream.

"YOU FILTHY BITCH!" he roared, slamming the creature against the wall with unnatural strength. The rifle butt came down again and again with wet crunching sounds, his voice rising to a hysterical pitch. "DIE! JUST FUCKING DIE, YOU WHORE! CRÈVE, PÉTASSE!!!"

Brains and bone fragments sprayed across his face as the rat's skull collapsed, but Thiery kept hammering at the ruined carcass until Jarek's hand clamped onto his shoulder.

"Easy there, professor," the Pole said dryly. "Think you got him."

Thiery froze, his chest heaving. He stared dumbly at his blood-smeared hands, then at the pulpy remains smeared across the tunnel wall. "Ah. Yes. Quite."

There was no time for remorse. Two more rats emerged from side passages while ominous scrabbling sounds signaled reinforcements approaching. Joan raised her pistol but held fire - waiting for the perfect shot as the creatures advanced.

Jarek worked his rifle's bolt with practiced ease. "Ready for an encore performance, professor?"

Thiery wiped gore from his face with a shaky hand, his eyes regaining their usual clinical detachment. "Only if you swear never to mention...that display."

Joan barked a short, humorless laugh. "Deal. Now shut up and shoot."

The tunnel became a deafening hellscape of screeching rodents, gunfire echoes, and the wet sounds of close-quarters combat.

"Like rats in a barrel," Cole muttered as he assessed their tactical situation.

"I HATE that comparison!" Jarek roared, putting a round clean through an attacker's front paw. The creature's shriek of pain was cut short by a second bullet that turned its head into pink mist.

Another rat lunged at Jarek, its yellowed fangs glistening with saliva. But the veteran was faster - his combat boot connected with a sickening crunch, sending the mutant sprawling. "Lost count of how many of these I stomped in my parents' basement," he remarked casually before crushing its skull underheel.

Cole's fight came from above. He didn't waste ammo on the rat that dropped from a ceiling pipe - his combat knife flashed silver in the dim light. The creature latched onto his chest, claws shredding his jacket as its snapping jaws sought his throat. With a grunt, Cole smashed it against the wall, using his forearm to pin it while his blade plunged into its belly again and again. Hot blood gushed over his hands as the rat went limp, its entrails spilling out in a steaming heap.

Then something grabbed his ankle.

The world tilted violently as Cole crashed onto his back. Standing over him was an albino monstrosity - its patchy white fur barely concealing the skull-like structure beneath. The tail whipped through the air like a bullwhip, cracking the concrete where Cole's head had been a second earlier.

He rolled aside just in time, feeling the wind from the massive tail's passage. His knife found its mark, slicing deep into the prehensile appendage. The mutant shrieked and recoiled, giving Cole the opening he needed.

With a snarl, he grabbed the bleeding tail and yanked hard, pulling the creature off balance. A brutal kick to its exposed muzzle sent it stumbling back. "On my mark!" Cole shouted to Thiery as he brought his rifle up. "FIRE!"

The concentrated volley tore the albino apart, its remains splashing into the filthy water.

Jarek and Joan continued their desperate defense. "Time for drastic measures!" Jarek bellowed, pulling the pin from a grenade.

"Have you lost your GODDAMN MIND?!" Joan screamed, realizing the explosion could collapse the entire tunnel.

"DOWN!" She tackled Jarek just as the grenade left his hand.

The detonation was deafening. The shockwave rippled through the confined space, shaking loose chunks of concrete from the ceiling. The floor beneath Cole's feet gave way with an ominous crack.

"Oh you've got to be shitting m-"

Then he was falling through darkness, the shouts of his team growing distant above him. Cold, foul water rushed up to meet him.

"Cole!" Thiery's voice echoed down the newly created shaft, barely audible over the ringing in everyone's ears.

From the depths came a muffled reply: "Aside from being neck-deep in literal shit, just peachy!"

Dust swirled thick in the air like gray snow. Joan pushed herself up on shaking arms, her head pounding from the concussion. Blood trickled from her nose as she tried in vain to blink away the afterimages burned into her retinas. Her hands trembled violently as she pressed them to her temples, as if trying to physically contain the tinnitus screaming through her skull.

Nearby, Jarek groaned and spat out a mouthful of blood and concrete dust. His face was a roadmap of fresh cuts, but his eyes held that familiar manic gleam that always appeared after successful demolitions.

"Fuuuck..." he rasped, his voice shredded by smoke inhalation.

Joan turned on him with murder in her eyes. "You could have buried us alive, you suicidal maniac!"

Jarek just grinned weakly, his mind flashing back to another explosion, another warzone. "But I didn't," he croaked. "Reminds me of that op in Rio with Cole. Blew up a whole fucking favela. Good times..."

"I swear you get off on this shit, Ovitz."

"Not as much as your company," he shot back with a pained wink.

Joan flipped him off but grudgingly offered a hand up. Her grip tightened just a fraction more than necessary - a silent rebuke he understood perfectly.

Thiery emerged from the dust cloud like a ghost, his glasses completely opaque with debris. "C-C-Cole!" he stammered, pointing at the gaping hole in the tunnel floor. "He fell through!"

Joan's head snapped around, her fingers instinctively tightening on her pistol grip. "Is he conscious?"

Thiery removed his ruined glasses with trembling hands, blinking owlishly. "I...I believe so..." Concrete dust cascaded from his helmet as he struggled to find his footing.
The three approached the gaping hole in the tunnel. Thiery aimed his flashlight downward, illuminating a pile of debris and black water below. About two and a half meters deep - not fatal, but enough to break a leg with a bad landing.

From the darkness below came Cole's voice:
"If you're done kicking rocks up there, get down here. Found something interesting."

Thiery jumped first. His landing was accompanied by a loud splash and French curses. He stood up shaking water off his uniform.
"What the hell happened here?" he asked, wiping his glasses.

"Ovitz collapsed the tunnel with a grenade," Joan answered as she prepared to jump.
"One cave-in wasn't enough for him?"

She landed gracefully, barely making a splash. Ovitz followed with a heavy thud.

Joan immediately noticed Cole crouched by the water, examining something intently. His flashlight revealed strange outlines in the dark...

Cole stood up, his boot hitting something soft. He kicked it - revealing a pile of half-rotted waste mixed with bones.
"Someone had a recent meal," he said dryly, though disgust flickered in his eyes.

Thiery bent down, his light revealing a deformed skull - eye sockets melted together, the nasal bridge unnaturally elongated as if transforming into something else.
"God..." he recoiled as if burned.

"Something big," Cole muttered, studying the remains. "Big enough to swallow a grown man whole."

"Maybe they eat each other?" Joan crossed her arms, her voice trembling.

"I hope so," Ovitz replied, but without his usual bravado.

Thiery, still pale, unfolded the map, tracing tunnel lines with his finger.
"Which way now?"

"Since we're off course," Cole shot a glance at Ovitz, "thanks to our grenade-happy friend here cutting off our retreat, we don't have many options."

Thiery sighed but nodded:
"It's not all bad. We're in tunnel SHB-NK 203. It should lead to the central water treatment plant. From there - to the surface."

"Every cloud has a silver lining, eh?" Ovitz snorted, approaching the pile of remains. "But this bothers me."

Thiery raised an eyebrow:
"Did I actually just hear something bothers you?"

"Yeah!" Ovitz spread his hands. "Believe it or not, I'm still human. And I don't like the idea of something bigger than overgrown rats lurking nearby."

Joan shook her head:
"Sometimes I can't tell if you're joking."

The tunnel answered with a hollow echo - something dripping ahead, the sound spreading like a warning.

The darkness here was different - thick, heavy, like liquid tar. Cole's damaged flashlight flickered, casting uneven beams that illuminated mold-covered pipes and peeling paint.

"Stay sharp, weapons ready," Cole's voice sounded muffled against the damp walls.

Thiery followed, breathing rapidly. He avoided looking down - the black, oily water seemed alive. Occasionally something stirred beneath the surface.

"No one's been here... in a long time."

Ovitz, bringing up the rear, snorted:

"Well thank God for that. Fewer witnesses."

But the joke fell flat.

The tunnel suddenly widened into a massive circular chamber - an old pit filled with churning black water. A rusted grate bridge led to shadowy machinery at the center.

Then Thiery saw the bones. Everywhere.
Gnawed, scattered, embedded in the muck. Skulls with hollow sockets, ribs jutting like broken umbrella spokes.

"Christ... the stench..."

The smell hit them - sweetly rotten with a chemical bite. Thiery grabbed the wall as his body convulsed, vomiting into the water.

"Je m'excuse," he wiped his mouth, face white. Cole didn't comment, his eyes scanning the shadows for movement.

"Stay alert. Whatever ate these people might still be hungry."

The grate creaked ominously underfoot. The water below bubbled as if something large stirred in the depths.

Joan took point, steps cautious but firm. She'd seen this before - and knew silence could be the worst sign.

"Quiet..." she whispered.

Then Cole's light died. Darkness. Silence.

The tunnel trembled. The sluggish water suddenly churned, bubbles of foul foam rising and popping with wet smacks.

"Back!" Cole jerked away, raising his rifle.

Something emerged from the black ooze. First a humped back - lumpy, oozing pustules that pulsed with black sludge. Then it rose fully.

Three meters of quivering flesh.

A grotesque hybrid of an overgrown tadpole and giant insect. Black-green skin glistening like rotten fruit dipped in oil. A head without eyes, just a gaping maw with a wart-covered tongue lolling out.

"God..." Joan froze, fingers digging into Cole's sleeve.

The creature breathed. Thick, poisonous vapor billowed from its nostril-like holes. The stench hit them - rotten eggs, decaying flesh and something chemical, caustic.

Thiery, pale as chalk, whispered:

"It's... a Shoggoth. Only Lovecraft's looked cuter."

The shoggoth (no other name fit this nightmare) tilted its head as if listening. The eyeless monster turned toward them, nostrils flaring.

"It's blind," Cole realized sharply. "Hunts by smell."
The creature took a step forward.

Its long, curved talons—like a griffon's—sank into the murky water. Behind it, a massive, scaly tail lashed side to side, balancing its grotesque frame.

"Don't. Move." Jarek's whisper was razor-edged, his hand inching toward his pistol.

Too late.

Joan flinched—a tiny, instinctive jerk.

The Shoggoth roared.

Its maw split open, rows of jagged teeth glistening, and it charged.

Cole reacted first:

"FIRE!"

The beast sensed them instantly. Its eyeless head swiveled, nostrils flaring as it drank in the scent of sweat and fear.

"Split up!" Cole grabbed Joan, dragging her left.

Jarek and Thiery dove right, scrambling behind collapsed rubble.

The Shoggoth's tail—thick as a log—whipped through the air, missing Cole by inches. The shockwave seared his face as he rolled clear.

"Keep your distance!" He slammed a fresh mag into his rifle.

Thiery crouched by a rusted ladder, fumbling with the Molotov he'd cobbled together in Joan's hideout. His hands shook.

"Cole—lure it under the pipes!"

But the Shoggoth was already coming for him.

Its barbed tongue shot out like a whip. Thiery twisted—too slow.

The stinger pierced his shoulder.

"AAGH!"

White-hot agony seared through his nerves. Venom. His muscles locked. Vision blurred. Cole unloaded into the tongue. Bullets shredded wet flesh—the beast screeched, retracting its weapon. Thiery collapsed, clutching the wound. Black-tinged blood oozed between his fingers.

"Hang on, frog-eater!" Jarek lunged toward him—

Then—movement. Rat-hybrids poured from a nearby pipe.

Joan's pistol barked:

"Flank's compromised!"

Jarek spun—his rifle BOOMED, vaporizing the lead rat.

"Handle the big one—I'll hold these bastards off!"

The Shoggoth whirled, charging Cole like a freight train. A ton of rage and muscle.

Cole dived sideways—

CRASH!

The beast slammed into a pipeline support. Metal groaned. Pipes collapsed, sealing the tunnel in half.

Now:

Cole & Thiery — one side. Jarek & Joan — the other.

The Shoggoth thrashed between them.

"Cole!" Jarek's shout cut through the chaos. "The pipes!" Cole understood.

"Thiery—can you move?"

The scientist nodded, gripping his Molotov.

"Still... breathing..."

Cole sprinted along the trench, firing to bait the beast. The Shoggoth gave chase.

Thiery climbed, hauling himself onto the remnants of the ladder—above the creature.

"Eat this, you bastard—"

He lit the Molotov. Shattered it across the Shoggoth's back.

WHOOSH.

Flames engulfed the monster. It howled, reeling blindly—

—right under the dangling pipes.

"JAREK—NOW!"

The Pole already had his shot lined up.

BOOM.

The support exploded. A ton of rusted metal crushed the Shoggoth into the water.

The impact sent waves crashing against the walls. One last spasm—

Then...Silence.

Thiery gasped, venom burning through his veins. Jarek vaulted the debris, scanning him.

"Still with us, egghead?"

A weak grin. "Unfortunately..."

They hauled him up. Staggered toward the exit.

The excavation pit was behind them now, but its stench—rotting decay, chemical fumes, and something indescribably alien—had seeped into their skin, hair, and lungs. The team emerged onto the abandoned railway tracks of an old metro station where trains once rumbled, now replaced by a deathly silence broken only by dripping water.

Cole was the first to climb out of the drainage pit, his boots squelching as they left wet prints on the rusted rails. He turned, offering a hand to Joan. She took it silently, her fingers trembling but gripping with stubborn strength—she wouldn't show weakness. Not now.

The tunnel stretched ahead, swallowed by darkness. The walls, once tiled, were now cracked and moldy. Torn wires dangled here and there, sparking with faint blue light—the last flickers of life in this dead place.

Thiery trudged at the rear, clutching his bandaged shoulder. The wound from the Shoggoth burned, but the pain felt distant, dulled by adrenaline. He blinked, trying to clear the fog from his vision. Joan, walking beside him, asked quietly:

"Hurts bad?"

He looked at her. Her face was pale, dark circles under her eyes, but her gaze was sharp.

"Not fatal," he said, shrugging—then winced. "Well, maybe a little fatal."

She snorted—a short, unexpected sound, more like a stifled laugh.

"Means you'll live."

"Unfortunately," he echoed, but this time with a hint of a joke.

Cole, up ahead, raised a fist—halt.

"Fork ahead. Left keeps us on the tunnel. Right—some kind of door."

Jarek clicked his flashlight.

"Let's get in the door. I’m done with these fucking catacombs."

Shadows stretched like skeletal fingers along the walls, clawing at the remains of unfinished exhibits. The museum’s storage room resembled a crypt—dust-covered relics of a history that never saw the light of day.

Cracked display cases held strange artifacts: yellowed maps marked in red pencil, taxidermied animals with dull eyes, busts of party officials whose faces now looked weary rather than triumphant. In one corner, draped in canvas, loomed the skeleton of some machine—maybe an old steam engine, maybe part of an abandoned installation.

Cole stepped in first, rifle still ready. His eyes scanned for movement.

"Clear."

He dropped his pack, sending dust swirling in the flashlight’s beam.

Jarek flopped onto a crate labeled "Fragile. Handle with Care"—ignoring the wood’s ominous creak.

"At least it’s not leaking from the ceiling."

He yanked off his helmet, ran a hand through his buzzcut, then sneezed—dust clogging his nose.

"Fuck. Can’t even breathe in here."

Thiery eased onto a wooden pallet, gritting his teeth as pain flared in his side. He wiped his glasses on his filthy sleeve—instantly regretting it as the lenses smeared.

"Perfect."

Joan wandered between rows, her flashlight revealing fragments of the past:

"Look." She pointed at a photo display. "Old construction plans."

The yellowed images showed helmeted workers standing before a massive excavation site. The caption read: * Granica Nowa / Gorky-17. Foundation laying. 1974.*

"So this museum was meant to showcase the city," Thiery muttered.

"Or bury its secrets," Cole added, rolling his shoulders.

Jarek rummaged through his pack, pulling out a crumpled cigarette pack.

"Anyone?"

"Seriously?" Thiery arched a brow. "After everything today, you still smoke?"

"Especially after everything today." Jarek lit up, inhaling deeply before blowing smoke at the ceiling. "Speaking of—egghead, what the hell was that thing back in the pit?"

Thiery sighed.

"In short? Something that shouldn’t exist."

"Wow, thanks, Copernicus." Jarek smirked. "And here I thought it was just a pissed-off mutt."

Joan, leaning against a display case, suddenly laughed—short, unexpected.

"What?" Jarek frowned.

"Nothing. Just..." She waved a hand. "After all that hell, we’re sitting here, and you ask what it was. Like we’re on a damn picnic."

Jarek grinned.

"What, you want me to scream and bash my head in? Day’s shitty enough."

Thiery once again began examining the stand with old photographs of the city.
"A strange name for a Polish city... Gorky-17," he mused. "Sounds like a spy’s codename from an old movie."

Jarek turned to him:
"It used to have a different name. Granica Nowa—under Polish rule, Neumark—under the Germans... Or maybe Stara Wieś—who even remembers now."

"Then why 'Gorky'? And where does the number come from?" Thiery adjusted his glasses.

Jarek shrugged:
"Because there was a research center here. Such towns were always renamed—so no one would ask unnecessary questions. Dzerzhinsk-12, Tomsk-7... The number is the facility’s code."

Thiery tried to joke:
"And 'Gorky'—because life here was so cheerful?"

Jarek replied without a smile:
"Because there was a chemical plant here. And research labs."

Joan looked at another photograph—smiling engineers standing next to a model of the "city of the future."

Joan stared at the picture of the grinning engineers and said quietly:
"I hope at least they believed they were building something good."

Jarek skimmed his eyes over the photos.
"They did. Most likely."

Cole, meanwhile, spread a map on a crate, weighing the corners with empty shells.

"We rest for 30. Then we move."

"To heaven?" Jarek asked.

"If we're lucky," Cole didn't even look up.

"You okay?" Joan asked quietly, nudging the Frenchman.

Thiery nodded slowly—then immediately grimaced in pain.
"Oh yes, just perfect. Feel like I've run a marathon... while being hit by a truck. Repeatedly."

A faint smile tugged at Joan's lips.
"Back in med corps, we called that 'Standard Tuesday'."
"And Monday was...?"
"Worse."

Thiery snorted—then groaned, clutching his side.
"Christ... Got any painkillers? Or failing that, something strong enough to sterilize a wound... from the inside?"

Joan rummaged through her pack and produced a flat metal flask.
"Medical-grade ethanol. Should dilute it with—"
"Oh, mademoiselle, you read my mind!" Thiery snatched the flask, unscrewed it, and took a swig before she could blink.
"Hey! I said dilute—"
"Pfah! What's the difference?" He winced, then relaxed. "You know... you're not like other jarheads."
"That a compliment?"
"Suppose so. You don't shout. Don't bark orders. You're just... normal."

Joan burst out laughing.
"That might be the weirdest compliment I've ever gotten."

From across the room, Jarek shook his head:
"Fuck me. Even half-dead, the frog's still got game. Smooth bastard."

Cole let out something between a snort and a chuckle. The silence that followed wasn't oppressive anymore. Beyond these museum walls, nightmares waited—but here, among dust-covered exhibits, they allowed themselves to be human. Exhausted. Battered.
Alive.

Thierry, rummaging through his backpack, noticed the unnatural stiffness in Jarek's movements out of the corner of his eye. He sat hunched on a crate, clenching and unclenching his right fist convulsively. Usually brimming with raw power, he now looked sickly, a shadow of himself.

Jarek knew he was losing control. That breakdown with Cole in the tunnel wasn’t just anger—it was a system failure. The "Chrome"-series implants didn't just enhance muscles. They were grafted into the neural network, blurring the lines between pain, rage, and will. Jarek’s fiery temper had become a bigger problem, not just for others, but now for himself.

The gnawing pain came in waves—it felt like rust eating steel from the inside. He’d hoped to last longer, but his body was betraying him. He reached into an inner pocket behind his vest and pulled out an ampoule. A special one, round and clear. Inside, an oily liquid swirled with a phosphorescent glow, like a captured fragment of the northern lights.

He felt for the cold metal of the neural port at the base of his skull, just under his hairline. Without hesitation, with a practiced motion, he inserted the needle.

Ovitz closed his eyes, and the world flipped. The pain receded as if washed away by a tidal wave. A piercing ring shot through his skull. His whole body shuddered, and he bit his lip until it bled. A spasm ran down his neck, and for a split second, the same phosphorescent gleam flashed in his eyes.

"Let it be well for us all," he hissed through gritted teeth, "now and henceforth, no matter what." The phrase sounded like an ancient incantation.

Ten seconds later, he exhaled, dropping the empty ampoule. The tremors subsided. He slowly clenched and unclenched his fist. His body obeyed again.

Thierry hadn't intervened during the ritual. Now he approached, his gaze tracing the neural port, the unnatural contours of the muscles in Jarek’s neck.

"Neurostabilizer based on modified nootropics and immune response suppressants," he said with clinical interest. "But you’re administering it directly into the spinal canal, through a non-standard interface! A half-percent dosage error and you’d face either neurotoxic shock or permanent paralysis. Or death."

"That was the price, Professor," Ovitz turned his head toward him. "The price of a life. One I had to fight to reclaim."

Thierry crouched down, examining the white scars on the back of Jarek’s skull.

"You’ve got... Chrome series seven. ‘Oneiric Industries.’" He traced a line in the air, as if recalling schematics. "Military-funded development. The project was later scrapped—unstable CNS integration. Psychotic breaks, aggression, tissue rejection. But yours..." He frowned. "These show signs of custom modification. Hand-tooled work. High-grade, but not factory-issue. How did you..."

Jarek rubbed his face, scratching his cheek.

"Got caught in a meat grinder, years back. Army surgeons said I’d never play the violin again. But I... ‘got lucky.’" He spat the word like a curse. "Found a covert clinic-morgue on the outskirts of Warsaw. Run by a heavyset Ethiopian, face covered in ritual scars. Went by ‘Papa Carlos.’"

"He was a former combat surgeon and a big fan of underground industrial. Said he’d install Chrome in me, but not the ‘tin-can’ version from the army catalog—his own build. ‘Chrome 2.0.’ The difference was in the price and the side effects."

"The price wasn’t money. It was a few rare bootlegs of KMFDM and Coil concerts. Took some serious ass-tearing to track those down. He did his job. Patched me up like he was rebuilding his favorite motorcycle."

"And so... here’s the price. These damn injections. Each one’s like a little death."

"The dosage could be calculated more precisely," Thierry finally said, standing up. "If you give me a sample of the stabilizer and five minutes with the interface. Rejection risk drops by thirty percent."

Jarek snorted.

"Fine. But if you fry my brain—I’ll shoot you."

It was at that moment the scrape of Cole’s boots echoed through the space.

The air hung thick with decades of dust and neglect. Flashlight beams cut through the darkness, illuminating surreal fragments: shattered display cases, cobwebbed busts, crates labeled "Fragile" in peeling paint. In one corner lay the yellowed skeleton of some prehistoric creature, its ribs jutting like skeletal fingers clawing from the earth.

Cole moved cautiously around debris, his boots crunching on plaster. Suddenly, his light caught a gaping hole in the wall—jagged edges crumbling inward, as if something massive had smashed through.

"Ovitz—check for hostiles," he ordered, voice muffled in the tomb-like space.

Jarek drew his pistol. His bulk barely fit through the breach, dislodging brick fragments. Beyond stretched a cavernous exhibition hall—now a surreal labyrinth of relics and construction debris. A cracked plaster model of an ancient city stood near rotting paintings in gilded frames.

"Fucking B-movie horror set," Jarek muttered, advancing.

His beam landed on a corpse.
Wrong.
The body lay twisted—pale skin mottled with greenish scales, neck bent at an impossible angle. The lower half vanished behind rusted barrels. The face—Christ, the face—mouth frozen in a silent scream, eye sockets hollow except for twin pits of absolute blackness.

Jarek signaled the others—then froze.
The corpse twitched.

A violent spasm, like a puppet yanked by invisible strings. Those black eyes ignited with feverish light. Jarek dove behind the shattered wing of an antique plane, heart hammering.

The thing unfolded itself—legs fused into a scorpion's tail ending in a barbed stinger. Feet warped into a single, bladed spike.

"The fuck kind of nightmare is this?" Jarek breathed.

The scorpion-man (no other name fit) raised its head with a wet hiss. As if summoned, two more slithered from the ruins.

"Thought you said 'clear'?" Thiery whispered.
"I said 'probably'!" Jarek snapped back, grip tightening on his pistol.

"Charming company," the scientist muttered, edging toward the breach.

Jarek's hand brushed his near-empty mag.
Four rounds. Four goddamn rounds against this hell.

His scavenger's eye landed on an axe—old but solid, its wide blade flecked with rust but still lethal. He hefted it; five kilos of unforgiving steel that could split skulls like firewood.

"Well hello, grandpa," Jarek murmured, thumb testing the edge.

Thiery limped over, bandaged arm cradled. "You're seriously fighting mutants with that relic?"
Jarek swung it experimentally. The blade whistled.
"Better than bare hands. Though I bet they'd lend you a scalpel, professor."

Joan called from across the room, holding up a cavalry saber:
"If you're done comparing... tools, we've got better options."

The storage room seemed to awaken around them—every discarded artifact becoming a weapon. Even shattered displays yielded meter-long metal rods that Thiery began wrapping with duct tape into makeshift spears.

A rare smirk touched Cole's lips: "Arms exhibit. Take what we can."

Jarek was already lashing the axe to his belt. "Let's hope the next exhibit isn't alive and collecting us."

A distant crash echoed through the building. Everyone froze. Even the rusty axe suddenly felt inadequate.

Thiery adjusted his glasses with a sigh:
"Did anyone really think we'd get a breather?"

The scorpion-men tensed, barbed tails quivering. Their pitch-black eyes tracked every movement.

Cole backed toward a stack of crates. "Options?" he whispered.

Joan gripped her saber, knuckles white.
"Split them up. Distract some."

Thiery took the blade, testing its weight. The thought flashed:
I'm a scientist, not a soldier. Then: If not me—who?

"I'll draw them off. Run for the exit."

Before Cole could protest, Thiery charged, saber flashing. "Come on, you bastards! Who's first?!"

The creatures hissed, half peeling away to pursue. Thiery led them toward the boiler room—narrow spaces where a blade might hold them back.

He braced against a rusted tank, saber raised.
"Alright... let's dance."

But the scorpion-men suddenly froze. Their eyes widened. Then they spun around and scuttled away as if terrified of something. Thiery smirked.

"What, scared now?"

Then he heard it.

A growl. Deep as a steam engine. He turned slowly.

The boiler he'd just been standing beside shifted. Rusted bolts screeched, metal groaned—and from beneath the tank emerged six spindly, segmented legs coated in grease.

From the hatch above rose something. A bloated torso, sagging with scarred, scabbed flesh. Its head—screwed into what resembled an old diving helmet, but with blood-red lenses instead of glass.

On its back—gas canisters connected to a contraption that rattled like a locomotive. And in its hands... A nailgun. Long, rusted, barrel bristling with metal shards.

Thiery stood paralyzed.

"This isn't real. It's just a boiler. Just an old rusted tank. It's—"

But it breathed. And it saw him. His thoughts shattered into one primal scream:

"RUN."

He bolted. Behind him, the Fat Steam Boiler lurched into pursuit, its nailgun spinning up with a mechanical screech.

Thiery tore through the museum's relic maze, his heart hammering hard enough to crack ribs. The Fatman Boiler's six-clawed legs pounded the concrete, leaving fist-sized craters.

"MOVE! It's—Christ knows what!" he screamed, skidding into the main hall where the team waited.

Cole assessed instantly:
"Jarek—flank left! Joan—high ground! Thiery—on me!"

The walls shook as the monstrosity crashed in. The nailgun whirred—its first volley whistled overhead, embedding in a marble statue behind them.

"FIRE!"

Gunfire filled the hall. Bullets ricocheted off the boiler-armor, leaving mere scratches. Even Joan's sniper shot only dented its helmet. Jarek's rifle jammed worse with each shot.

"Fuck this ain't workin'!" Jarek snarled, slamming in a fresh mag.

Thiery, gasping, spotted it:
"Its back! Pressure regulator and tubes—that's the weak point!"

Cole nodded:
"Jarek—distract! Joan—make the shot!"

Jarek grinned wildly, grabbing empty cans:
"Hey lardass—catch!"

He hurled them, creating chaos. The Fatman Boiler turned toward the noise, nailgun charging.

Joan scrambled atop the ruins of the "Worker and Kolkhoz Woman" statue. The Kristensen rifle—their last hope—settled against her shoulder.

She squeezed the trigger.

Click.

"DAMMIT!"

The Fatman Boiler began turning back. Joan racked the bolt.

BANG.

The regulator burst, spewing scalding steam. The monster roared, movements turning erratic.

"It's working!" Thiery yelled.

But the Fatman Boiler wasn't done. Enraged, it smashed everything—nails shredding walls, shattering display cases.

Cole saw the opening: "Molotov! Into the steam lines!"

Thiery hurled the bottle. WHOOSH. For one second—silence. Then—

KABOOM.

The Fatman Boiler seized, its metal shell glowing red-hot. With a final screech, it collapsed, limbs twitching once before stilling.

"Well... that was fun," Jarek broke the silence, wiping sweat.

Joan climbed down, hands shaking. The Kristensen rifle—her last tie to a dead comrade—was ruined. She tossed it aside without a word.

Thiery knelt, adrenaline still coursing:
"I've... never seen anything like that. It defies every biological—"

Joan offered a hand up:
"But now we know—headshots don't always work. Good call, Professor."

Cole examined the smoldering wreck:
"We move. If this is here... what's waiting ahead?"
Jarek snorted:
"Hope it's something less disgusting. Though... doubt it."

The team had barely caught their breath after fighting the Fatman Steam Boiler when the scorpion-men slithered from the wreckage. Their movements were unnaturally fluid—gliding rather than walking.

Joan was first. One monster lunged with inhuman speed. She dodged at the last second, but its claws still sank into her shoulder, tearing flesh. Blood sprayed the floor—then came the horror. The creature's skull split open with a sickening crack, revealing rotating bone plates like a chainsaw's teeth. They gnashed into her side, ripping chunks of meat.

"FUCK!" Jarek roared.

His axe flashed in the dim light, carving a lethal arc. Steel met flesh with a wet crunch. The scorpion screeched—but Jarek was already swinging again.

The second strike—harder, angrier.

The blade cleaved through its neck. The chainsaw skull clattered away, teeth still grinding impotently. The body spasmed and collapsed, spilling black ichor.

Cole spotted stairs—narrow, metal, leading up. "THERE! MOVE!" He grabbed Joan's uninjured arm. Thiery hooked her other side. Her skin was slick with blood.

"Stay with us," he whispered, feeling her breaths turn shallow.

Scorpions attacked from all sides. One latched onto Cole's leg—he blew its head off mid-stride. Another pounced on Jarek from behind. The Pole spun—burying his axe in the thing's gaping maw.

The blade stuck fast in bone.

"Kurwa mac!"

He yanked. No use. No time. Abandoning the axe, he drew his pistol.

The door. Rusted, paint peeling. Thiery slammed his shoulder into it—bruises blooming beneath his skin.

"IN! NOW!"

Cole and Jarek barely made it through before a scorpion crashed against the metal.

THUD. THUD. Claws splintered the wood.

"Barricade it!" Jarek scanned for anything heavy.

Cole was already dragging a massive cabinet, muscles burning. Another impact—a spiked tail burst through the door. Too late. The cabinet toppled, sealing them in.

Jarek eyed the trembling door. "Well... shit day." Deep down, he knew—this wouldn't hold.

Joan's blood seeped through Thiery's fingers, warm and sticky. She clenched her jaw, stifling moans. Every step was agony. Cole led—ammo critically low. Jarek covered the rear.

The Jurassic Hall greeted them with icy silence. The Allosaurus ribs jutting from its display mocked them—a cage of fate.

Thiery half-dragged Joan. Her legs trailed blood. Face white. Lips a thin line. With trembling hands, she jammed a painkiller into her thigh—a stifled gasp escaping.

"Hang in there, sis," Jarek muttered, voice hollow.

The pain ebbed, leaving numbness. Joan squeezed her eyes shut—black spots dancing. Red hair clung to her forehead, matted with sweat and filth.

Then—a groan. Deep. Prolonged. Like the earth itself straining under unbearable weight. Then—scraping.

Metal on concrete. Something huge dragged itself closer.

Cole raised a fist—halt.

Silence. Just breathing. And that scrape. Closer. Closer.

"Steady," Cole whispered, gripping his knife. Thiery, keeping his eyes fixed on the dark corridor, handed his rifle to Owitz.

They formed a circle—backs together. A last stand. A voice from the dark:

"Here! QUICK!"

A raspy whisper from a security door barely visible between exhibits.

Cole hesitated. Trap? Or their only chance...

"Go," he nodded.

They ran, hauling Joan. The room was cramped, reeking of sweat. A flickering bulb cast jagged shadows.

A figure in the corner raised a hand:

"Quiet. Not a sound."

The stranger's voice crackled like an old radio. Thiery slowly closed the door behind them, the lock clicking shut with finality.

The walls were riddled with bullet holes—remnants of some forgotten battle. Through a gap in the crumbling brickwork, Cole watched with blood-chilling focus. His fingers dug into the masonry, leaving bloody smears in the dust. His heartbeat pounded so loud he feared it would betray their hiding place.

Then—He emerged from the dark corridor.

Three meters of nightmare clad in armor blackened by time and something far more sinister. The once-gleaming plate mail was now pitted with centuries of corrosion and strange organic growths, as if the metal were fusing with flesh. Cracked pauldrons bore twisted, defiled crosses. A skull for a face—empty sockets burning with crimson embers.

His sword—jagged, monstrous—scored the stone floor with each step, sparks flying. But the true horror was in his movements: mechanical, unnaturally fluid, like some animated statue powered by unfathomable forces.

Then—screeching metal.

The Scorpion finally smashed through the door, sending display cases flying. The Guardian went still. His skull-face turned slowly toward the intruder. From his throat came a sound—half grinding steel, half death rattle—that seared itself into Cole's mind. He knew he'd hear it in his nightmares until the day he died.

Blinded by rage, the Scorpion charged.

The Guardian moved faster than anything that size should. His iron gauntlet snatched the stinger tail—crunch. The Scorpion shrieked, writhing in that unbreakable grip.

Then the horror truly began.

The Guardian sheathed his sword.

With near-surgical precision, he began twisting the tail. Tendons snapped with wet pops. When the bloody appendage finally tore free, he hurled it at the wall—right where the team hid. Warm gore splattered Cole's face. He didn't dare wipe it away.

Even maimed, the Scorpion thrashed. The sword flashed once—bisecting the creature cleanly. Its upper half twitched in the Guardian's grip before slumping to the floor.

For one petrifying instant, those empty sockets turned directly toward their hiding place. In that moment, Cole understood true terror. Not just death—but whatever unspeakable fate awaited at those hands.

Then—a crash from the adjacent hall. The skull snapped toward the noise. With a final creak of armor, the monstrosity strode away, his blade leaving a smeared trail behind him.

Cole didn't move for ten full seconds after the footsteps faded. Only then did he realize he'd stopped breathing.

"It's gone..." His own voice sounded alien—disbelieving.

From the deepest shadows came a rasping reply:

"Once, he was this museum's caretaker."

Guns swung toward the voice. A hunched figure lurked among the debris.

"Even transformed, he remembers his duties."

Thiery squinted. "Show yourself."

"You'd be dead if I hadn't diverted him."

Cole kept his finger on the trigger. "We're grateful. Step into the light."

The shadows laughed—a sound like cracking ice.

"You're mistaken."

Suddenly—lights flickered to life overhead. Harsh fluorescence revealed the truth:

Jarek swore violently. "Holy fucking—!" His rifle came up.

Before them stood something that had almost been human.

Scaled flesh shifted between gangrenous greens and purples. Gills flared along its neck. When it smiled, the teeth were needle-thin and far too numerous.

"The monster never left," it whispered.

At that moment, the flickering ceiling lights suddenly blazed to full brightness, flooding the room with harsh illumination. Jarek gasped:

"Holy fucking shit!" His rifle snapped up instantly. "It's one of those things!"

"These bastards learned to mimic human speech!" Thiery took a shaky step back. "What the hell! Jarek, if this freak tries anything—waste it!"

Jarek already had his sights lined up, finger on the trigger. What stood before them was... neither man nor monster.

Its silhouette was fundamentally human but distorted—as if nature forgot the blueprint and sculpted it from half-remembered fragments. Scaly green skin, mottled with sickly yellow and purple patches like poison blooms. Gills pulsed along its neck, opening rhythmically as though still breathing underwater.

The arms—elongated, with webbing between clawed fingers. Legs—thick with swimming muscles. But the head...

Three fleshy fins protruded like grotesque sideburns. The face—some nightmare hybrid of gecko and deep-sea abomination never meant to see sunlight. Black eyes with pinprick pupils. Horizontal eyelids. A lipless mouth crammed with needle teeth.

Two tentacles twitched spasmodically from its back.

It wore tattered remnants of a suit—fabric rotting off its mutated frame.

Cole stood frozen, analyzing every detail. This mutant... was different. No animal rage in its movements—just cautious, almost human wariness. And those eyes... Something in those depthless black pools made him signal Jarek to hold fire.

The creature slowly raised webbed hands. Its gills fluttered as it strained to speak:

"I... won't hurt you." The voice was a wet rasp—each word clearly painful. Drool slicked its teeth, but there was no aggression. Just agony.

"Jarek, stand down!" Cole kept his weapon raised but uncertainty crept into his voice. What if Thiery was right? What if this was some new trick?

Jarek didn't hear. His trigger finger twitched. "One squeeze..." he whispered, beginning the pull—

Joan lunged, shoving his barrel upward. The shot shattered a light fixture, raining glass.

"Idiots! It saved us!" She planted herself between them, arms spread protectively.

"Yeah? Then why's it dressed like my ex-wife?" Jarek growled—but less convinced now.

"It speaks! That means some humanity remains!" Joan's breath came ragged. "Use your goddamn brains!"

Cole finally lowered his rifle. "Jarek. Weapon down." Steel in his tone now.

After a tense beat, the big man reluctantly complied—though his grip stayed white-knuckled.

The mutant exhaled—a bubbling wheeze. Something like... relief? flickered in those alien eyes.

"Please... don't fear me." Its vocal cords struggled with human speech.

It looked at its own claws—a heartbreakingly human gesture of self-loathing.

Cole kept his weapon lowered but ready. "What... are you?"

A spasm wracked its frame. "My name... was Jan. Jan Kurats."

Joan stepped closer—the only one who dared. "Jan... what happened to you?"

The hybrid shuddered. "Like... a nightmare plague. Burning through the city." Its tentacles coiled tight. "Many... changed."

"And before?"

A pause. Then, with terrible irony: "I studied... deep-sea creatures. Those that thrive... in darkness." A bitter laugh. Though now... less human than... Medusa."

The tentacles went limp. "Yet somehow... I remember. Enough to help you escape."

Cole still didn't trust—but holstered his pistol. Joan took another step.

"You'll... guide us?"

Jan Kurats looked up.

"Yes."

One of Medusa's tentacles twitched toward her involuntarily, but he sharply jerked it back as if ashamed.

Cole scanned the team - Joan watched with cautious sympathy, Jarek was visibly restraining his trigger finger, while Thiery observed Jan not with fear but scientific curiosity, his brain already analyzing the mutation for patterns.

"I think you can come with us," Cole finally said.

"What?!" Jarek exploded. "Commander, are you serious? You want this thing traveling with us?"

Joan snorted:
"What's wrong, Jarek? Afraid he'll violate your animal rights?"

"If we have a chance to help this man, we take it," Cole stated firmly.

Medusa straightened, electricity crackling across his tentacles:
"I owe you. And besides...this new body gives me advantages."

As the group moved out, Jarek suddenly shoved Medusa against a wall, pressing his gun to the hybrid's chest.

"Listen here, frogface," his voice was dangerously quiet. "I don't buy your sob story. You pull one fucking stunt I don't like..." He jammed the barrel harder, "...your mutant buddies will be scraping you off the walls. Understood?"

Medusa froze. His tentacles went limp. After a long pause, he simply nodded.

"And stay the hell away from me," Jarek wrinkled his nose in disgust.
"You reek of rotten fish. Pee-yew!"

He stalked off, leaving Medusa standing with bowed head. Joan gave him a sympathetic look but stayed silent. Cole just sighed heavily - this alliance wouldn't be easy.

Medusa sat in the corner, his tentacles twitching subtly as they mapped the space around him. The greenish skin with purple veins shimmered faintly under the emergency lights. He spoke no words, but his eyes - disturbingly human in that mutated face - tracked every movement with keen awareness.

Jarek made no effort to hide his revulsion. He sat opposite, elbows on knees, fingers flexing around his rifle grip. One thought circled relentlessly in his mind:

This is a mistake. A goddamn fatal mistake.

He watched Medusa's tentacles handle an old newspaper - too smoothly, too deliberately.

Not an animal. Smarter than he looks. Which makes him more dangerous.

Cole and Joan were murmuring over a map, but Jarek ignored them. His stare bored into the hybrid.

"The hell you staring at?" he suddenly barked.

Medusa slowly raised his eyes.

"Not staring. Listening."

The voice was unsettling - multiple tones layered together into an eerie echo.

"Oh, so now you're eavesdropping?" Jarek bared his teeth. "Cole, have you lost it? This freak'll eat us the second we turn our backs!"

Cole didn't even glance over:
"Ovitz. Enough."

"Enough?!" Jarek surged to his feet, fists clenched. "We've already lost three of ours! First that crazy old man, now we're babysitting this...this thing?!"

Medusa didn't move, but his tentacles stiffened slightly.

"Not a thing."

"Shut it!" Jarek took a threatening step forward. "You're not even human! You're...you're nature's fucking mistake!"

Thiery, silent until now, abruptly positioned himself between them:
"Ovitz, you're crossing a line."

"Oh sure!" Jarek scoffed. "Frog-lover defending the frog. How cute."

The room went still.

Cole finally turned. His gaze was steel-cold.

"Ovitz. Last warning."

Jarek held his commander's stare, then Medusa's.

He'll choose it. When it comes down to it, he'll choose it over us.

"Fine, whatever..." He waved dismissively and stepped back.

But his eyes promised:
I'm watching you, freak.

Medusa lowered his head.

"I understand his fear," he said quietly.

"Don't apologize," Cole cut in sharply. "We're a team. All of us."

Jarek ground his teeth.

No. Not all.

The dark corridor leading to the security room exhaled damp silence. Walls once white now bloomed with mold and cracks through which strange roots threaded. Their meager flashlight beams revealed peeling paint and claw marks - human, or something that used to be.

"Here," Medusa's voice crackled like static. One tentacle pointed to a door with a half-torn "Security" sign. "I gathered...what I could."

The door creaked open on a small space crammed with shelves and crates. The air was marginally cleaner but still thick with medicinal and dusty smells.

The room showed attempts at organization by hands not quite human anymore. On a table cluttered with empty cans and rags stood neatly arranged flashlights. Nearby - water bottles lined up like in a store display. A museum map covered in notes and arrows dominated one wall - Medusa had clearly studied this place.

"I...tried," he mumbled, almost apologizing for the mess.

Cole surveyed the space - the rag piles, jars of unidentifiable liquid, scattered tools. Chaotic, yet with a system, like the den of a creature clinging to civilization.

Jarek beelined for crates of ammunition in the corner. His face lit up when he found a box of buckshot.

"Finally," he shook the box, enjoying the metallic rattle. "Old KS-23's gonna sing again."

Thiery rummaged through medical supplies - bandages, antiseptics, even some morphine. Everything was carefully stored, though with clear improvisation: hand-labeled bottles, liquids transferred to random containers.

"You collected all this alone?" He held up a cloudy vial.

Medusa nodded, tentacles nervously tapping the table edge.

"Yes...Hard. But I...didn't want to die."

Joan found food stores - canned goods, crackers, even chocolate bars. All meticulously arranged, waiting for the apocalypse that had clearly arrived.

Cole studied the annotated map. Medusa knew this place better than they did. And he hadn't just hid - he'd prepared.

For what? Cole wondered but didn't ask. Some answers were better left unknown.

As Jarek loaded shells with practiced ease, Thiery watched Medusa. The hybrid's desperate attempt at order in this chaos stirred something unexpected - not disgust, but respect.

This wasn't just a storage room. It was the last stand of someone refusing to become a monster, even as the world around him had.

Medusa stood unnervingly still, his tentacles quivering slightly, those strange black eyes watching them with unsettling intensity.

"You're here because of the little girl, yes?" His voice was unnatural yet clear.

Cole frowned. The question caught him off guard.

"What girl?" He looked to the others for confirmation they were equally confused.

Medusa shook his head slowly, tentacles coiling anxiously.

"I saw a twelve-year-old girl run through here."

Joan whirled toward him, eyes widening.

"You're certain?" Her voice shook. "Could've been a hallucination? Adults barely survive here, let alone children..."

Thiery, silent until now, suddenly snorted.

"Nobody here seen Aliens?" He adjusted his glasses nervously. "Because this sounds like the start of a very bad horror movie."

Medusa's face twisted (as much as it could) as he jabbed a tentacle toward a ventilation grate.

"No, I tell you I saw her! In the museum!" His voice grew firmer. "Not my imagination. She crawled out of that vent."

All eyes turned to the bent metal, clearly damaged from inside. Cole felt ice trickle down his spine.

"And where'd she go? Did you see?"

Medusa lowered his eyes.

"She ran toward the knight's hall."

Silence hung thick in the air.

"It's dangerous there," he added quietly. "I wanted to call out to her, but..."

He gestured at himself—his green-tinged skin, the writhing tentacles, the unnatural features.

"My appearance would only frighten her more."

Thiery let out a heavy sigh.

"So we've got two options: either this guy actually saw the girl, in which case we need to find her..."

"Or he's lost his mind, in which case we still need to check," Cole finished.

Joan tensed.

"What if it's a trap?"

"Then," Cole racked his rifle's bolt, "we go in anyway."

The museum's darkness wasn't just absence of light—it felt viscous, tangible, like liquid tar filling every crevice. The air hung heavy with the stench of old leather, rusted metal, and something else that prickled the nostrils and left a coppery taste on the tongue.

Their flashlights carved islands of visibility in the gloom, revealing bizarre exhibits. Skeletons of prehistoric reptiles lined the narrow passageway—empty eye sockets tracking their progress, rib shadows trembling on the walls as if the creatures still breathed.

A massive tyrannosaur loomed over the path, its skull encrusted with coral-like growths, jaws forever frozen mid-snarl—as if it might animate at any moment.

Thiery kept close to the wall, fingers drumming nervously on his saber's hilt. His gaze kept flicking to Medusa moving ahead of them, tentacles undulating gently as they probed the air.

He says he remembers being human... But what remains of that man inside this body? What does he really feel when he looks at us? The thoughts throbbed in Thiery's mind like an infected wound.

Medusa suddenly froze, his greenish skin mottling with violet patches—a sign of agitation.

"Ahead... something moves," he whispered, his voice like dry leaves scraping stone.

Cole raised a fist—halt. The hall fell into tomblike silence, broken only by distant water dripping.

Then—movement. The shadow cast by a suit of knight's armor twitched. Thiery felt ice trickle down his spine.

Please just be a trick of the light...

Stained glass windows high above cast ghostly colored patterns across the floor—faint reminders that beauty once existed here.

And in that half-light—her.

Joan spotted the motion first. Her flashlight beam pinned a small figure huddled against a knight's armor display.

"You... who are you?" Joan's voice trembled, as if speaking louder might make the child disintegrate.

Red braids. A green checkered dress. A pale face with enormous eyes—a real, living child curled in this hellscape.

The girl didn't answer. Just shrank tighter, trembling like a cornered animal. Joan slowly knelt, setting her weapon aside.

"It's okay... we won't hurt you."

She reached out but didn't touch. The girl flinched but didn't retreat.

"What's your name?"

A whisper so faint it barely existed:

"L...Lilith..."

Joan couldn't stop herself—she pulled the girl into a fierce hug, feeling the tiny body shake against her.

"Dear God... how did you get here?"

Ovitz, standing back, grunted:

"Well... surprises all fucking night."

He turned to Medusa peering over his shoulder:

"Hey, tentacle-face—stay back. Don't freak the kid out more, she's barely stringing words together as is."

Medusa snorted (as much as a noseless entity could) and slithered deeper into shadow.

Thiery stood speechless. His scientific mind raced:

A child. Alive. Here. How? Why? How long has she survived in this nightmare?

Cole was the last to approach. His face remained stone, but for the first time in days, something human flickered in his eyes.

"We're getting you out," he said simply.

Lilith looked at him, then at the others.

"They're... everywhere..." she whispered.

"We know." Joan stroked her hair. "But you're not alone anymore."

Silence fell over the hall. Even the creaking of rusted armor stilled.

Cole gripped the radio, his knuckles white.

"Trombone, this is Flute. Come in!"

Static. Just the crackle of interference, like something vast and invisible was breathing over the channel, drowning every signal.

"Goddamn it!" He hurled the radio onto the stone floor. It bounced with a pathetic squeal, skittering to Thiery's feet.

The Frenchman was already crouched over his portable scanner, its flickering screen casting his gaunt face in blue light.

"Not just interference..." he muttered, trembling fingers adjusting settings. "It's... a system. Targeted jamming. Someone—or something—doesn't want us calling for help."

Joan shielded the girl's eyes from the bones scattered in the corner—the last "exhibits" left by previous visitors to this hall.

"Shh, shh... It'll be okay..." she murmured, though her own hands shook.

Medusa suddenly stiffened. His tentacles coiled, spotted skin bubbling with alarm.

"Something's here..." he hissed, slowly turning toward the row of mannequins.

That's when Cole noticed—one of the "mannequins" stood... wrong. Its pose was unnatural.

A twitch of movement between the still figures.

Subtle. Almost imagined. But mannequins don't breathe. And they certainly don't slowly turn their heads toward the living.

Cole raised his rifle.

"Don't move..."

Too late.

They emerged from the shadows—gray-lilac flesh like veined marble. Their bodies were feminine yet distorted, as if sculpted by a mad artist. Limbs too long, too fluid.

Their faces...

Flawless as classical statues, but lidless. Eyes—huge, black, pupil-less—tracked the team with cold curiosity. And their mouths... too wide, too wet, lips glistening with anticipation.

But the worst were the parasites.

One—thick, sinewy—had fused with a right arm, transforming it into a whip-like claw. Another sprouted from a spine, writhing like a serpent tipped with bone.

They pulsed in time with their hosts' breathing—separate creatures yet one.

"Protect McFadden and the girl!" Cole barked, falling back.

The first hybrid laughed—a soft, melodic sound that made it worse. Its claw-arm twitched—

—and they attacked.

Jarek fired first. Buckshot tore into a hybrid's chest, but it only staggered as if nudged. Black ooze sprayed from the wound.

"Headshots! Go for the heads!" Thiery yelled, dodging a whip that whistled past his face.

Cole aimed and fired. A hybrid's head burst like overripe fruit. The body spasmed but didn't fall. Its spine-parasite thrashed, hissed—and kept attacking autonomously.

Joan shielded the girl, pistol barking. One bullet hit a hybrid's eye—it shrieked like glass on glass.

Medusa lunged, tentacles wrenching a parasite from its host. The thing squealed, convulsed—then exploded in corrosive slime.

"Shoot the spine-parasites!" Jarek reloaded.

"Then tear them apart!" Cole ripped into another target.

The hall became hell.

Armor crashed from walls. Glass shattered. Hybrids kept coming, laughing, whispering, kissing the air with bloody mouths. One—gray-lilac flesh twisting—charged Medusa, its parasitic claw crushing everything in its path.

The hybrid's tentacles flexed—muscular, webbed between segments pulsing with violet-yellow veins.

The parasite struck first. A bone spur hissed toward Medusa's head.

The green-skinned fighter arched with unnatural grace. One tentacle coiled the claw-arm while another delivered 10,000 volts to the hybrid's chest.

Flesh blackened at contact points. The thing screeched—

—but its parasite wasn't done. A second appendage stabbed Medusa's side.

Thick black blood splattered stone.

Medusa snarled, slit-pupils contracting to threads. He gaped his maw—

—and spat acid full-face.

The hybrid's skin blistered, sloughed off in meaty strips. Yet it lunged, jaws snapping for Medusa's throat.

Tentacles impaled it simultaneously. A blue arc of electricity split the darkness.

The hybrid burst from within.

Gore painted the walls. The dying parasite twitched on the floor until Medusa crushed it underfoot. Acrid smoke rose from the remains.

The battle raged like a demonic symphony.

Hybrids weaved between armor displays, whip-claws scarring stone. Joan shielded the girl, her pistol roaring—but bullets only enraged them.

Then—

A scream.

Not fear. Not pain. Primal. Like skin being flayed without a blade.

Joan turned—

—and saw.

The girl's eyes whitened. Pupils dissolved like ink in water. Skin rippled with violet veins. Fingers elongated, cracked, reshaped into chitinous blades.

"No..." Joan stumbled back. "No, no, NO—"

But the girl wasn't a girl anymore.

Her jaw unhinged, splitting sideways to reveal twin rows of needle-teeth. A bony spur erupted from her spine. She looked at Joan. Hungry. Hateful.

"Lilith—" Joan choked on the name.

The mutant raised its claw—

—and pounced.

Joan closed her eyes, bracing for impact.

But instead of pain—a deafening clang as metal took the blow.

"Fuck me... Kids these days!"

Jarek slammed between them, intercepting the strike with his shotgun. The mutant's claw clamped around the gun, crushing steel.

"Oh no you don't, bitch—this is MINE."

Point-blank blast.

The hybrid's head vaporized in a crimson mist. Its body spasmed—then collapsed, splattering Joan with black ichor.

Jarek racked the shotgun, spitting on the corpse.

"Parenting's shit these days. Obvious."

Joan didn't move. Staring at what—who—had been a child seconds ago.

At her failure.

The knight's hall felt unnaturally silent after the storm of violence. The air hung thick with gunpowder, blood, and something worse—something organic slowly decomposing on the stone floor.

Joan leaned against the wall, fingers still locked around her pistol. Her gaze was empty. Staring at the hands that had held the girl. Before she became... something else.

"Hey, sister."

Jarek's gravel voice snapped her back. His face was scratched raw, but the usual mockery was gone.

"You alive?" Not teasing. Almost... concern.

Joan nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Just..."

"Just my ass." He shoved a flask at her. "Drink. Don't overthink it. We've seen worse shit."

A lie. They hadn't. But Joan took the flask. The fire in her throat grounded her.

Thiery sat cross-legged, tools spread before him. His hands shook, but his mind worked with icy precision.

"We can't break the jamming normally." He glanced at Medusa.

The mutant's tentacles still twitched with faint electric pulses.

"You sense EM fields, yes?"

A slow nod.

Thiery wired a transmitter to those writhing limbs. "We'll use you as an antenna. Pulse through the interference."

Cole stepped closer. "Will it work?"

"Theoretically."

"Practically?"

Thiery met Medusa's gaze. "It'll hurt."

A cracked smile. "What's new?"

The pulse hit.

First—a hum. Then a surge. Medusa's tentacles lit up blue, veins glowing like live wires. His body arched—a silent scream.

"Now!" Thiery yelled.

Cole keyed the radio. "Trombone, this is Flute! Come in!"

Static. Then—

"Flute, Trombone reads you!"

The signal frayed. Medusa convulsed, tentacles seizing.

"He's burning out!" Joan shouted.

"Hold on!" Thiery begged.

But Medusa was already collapsing. The last thing transmitted—museum roof coordinates.

Then—dead air.

Cole looked up. "Roof. Extraction's on the roof."

Hope. Fragile. Fleeting. But enough.

Shadows from the vaulted ceilings draped over Medusa's kneeling form. His usually iridescent skin had grayed. Tentacles—once powerful—hung limp like poisoned snakes.

He muttered.

Fragments of a dead language. Names? Memories? His shark-like eyes glazed over, lost between reality and nightmare.

Jarek stood over him, reloading. The shotgun's click echoed too loud.

"He's served his purpose." Cold. Clinical.

The barrel rose.

"Time to put him down."

"JAREK—NO!"

Joan slammed between them. Not fear in her eyes—fury.

"He just gave us a way out!"

The shotgun didn't lower.

"He's a fucking hybrid. How do we know he won't turn?"

"He fought for us!"

"And might eat us next!"

They stood locked. Tension like a live wire.

Medusa twitched slightly, his lips trembling.

"...don't... touch me... don't..."

The voice was strange, barely audible—but human.

Jarek scowled. Joan didn’t back down.

"Are you so consumed by hate that you can’t accept someone not being like you?"

"I’m a realist, sweetheart," he spat. "And realism tells me not to trust that thing."

"You’re just scared."

His eyes narrowed to slits.

"Stay in your lane, sister."

"And you stop playing God, soldier."

The air itself seemed to freeze. Jarek looked away first.

"Fine. Have it your way."

He jerked the shotgun down—but his fingers still gripped the stock like a coiled spring.

"But if it makes one wrong move—"

Joan didn’t answer. She just knelt beside Medusa, gently lifting his head.

"Hang on..." she whispered. "We won’t leave you."

The museum’s dark corridors stretched endlessly. Faded frescoes watched with hollow eyes, their colors bleeding into the damp. The air hung thick with rot and ancient wood polish.

The team moved cautiously, step by step, ears straining for any sound.

Medusa trailed behind, tentacles twitching weakly. His usually sharp eyes were clouded. He swayed like a drunk, thoughts scrambling between fractured horrors.

Thiery slowed, falling in beside him.

"Holding up?"

A slow nod.

"My mind... fog. But still functional."

Thiery gripped his shoulder—a gesture he’d never have dared before.

"You saved us. Your abilities... invaluable. Jarek just—"

"Hates me," Medusa hissed. "I understand. I hate what I’ve become too."

His voice cracked.

"But I hope... base has an antidote."

Thiery squeezed harder.

"I’ll make sure Onirique Industries helps you. Best lab in the world."

Medusa said nothing. But for a second—something like hope flickered in his eyes.

Joan stalked ahead, knuckles white around her pistol. She shot venomous glares at Jarek, who stomped louder just to spite her.

Jarek turned, face twisted. Cole, walking between them, halted abruptly.

"Enough."

No shout. Just steel. Even Jarek flinched.

"Extraction’s close. Once we’re out—hate each other all you want. But now—get it together."

Joan looked away. Jarek snorted. Thiery sighed. Medusa stared at the floor.

Then—as if mocking their hope—the building shook. Something huge moved below. Cole raised his rifle.

"Run."

And they ran. To the roof. To escape. To their last chance to flee this city of nightmares.

Shadows clawed at the walls as they reached the grand hall—dominated by a blackened Viking longship, its prow spearing toward the ceiling like a ghost mid-voyage.

Then—

WHIRRR!

A spinning angle-grinder disc screamed through the air—decapitating a marble bust. The head shattered on impact.

"COVER!" Cole shoved Joan behind a display case.

From the darkness—three figures emerged.

The Headnail-Men. Once, they were human. Workers, maybe—carpenters, welders, laborers. Now their bodies had become walking nightmares from a madman's workshop.

Their skin was cracked and brown like old plaster, studded with nails driven deep into flesh—as if someone had hastily pieced them back together. One arm ended in a buzzsaw, its teeth fused to bone. The other tapered into a screwdriver blade, jutting from the forearm like a grotesque finger. But the worst part was their stomachs.

Ribs split apart, revealing second mouths—gaping, lined with rusted nails for teeth. Yellow slime oozed between them.

The first one lunged. The saw screeched, carving the air.

Cole ducked. His rifle stitched the creature’s chest—it didn’t stop. Thiery hurled an acid vial. The liquid ate through its face, but the Headnail-Man only laughed, its jaw falling off to reveal a bone saw inside its throat. Thiery put three pistol rounds into its skull. The thing toppled backward.

Jarek snapped.

"Enough of this shit!"

His implants whirred. Hydraulics in his arms and back kicked into overdrive. Muscles swelled, scars turning crimson with strain. He charged.

A Nail-Man swung its saw—Jarek caught the blade and crushed it in his grip. Bone cracked. Metal bent.

"NEXT!"

The third one staggered back, screwdriver-hand trembling. Cole took aim.

"Jarek—DOWN!"

A burst tore through the last Headnail-Man's skull. It collapsed, spewing black ooze.

Silence. Just ragged breathing and blood dripping off the saw. Jarek straightened, his implants hissing as they cooled.

"Who's fucking next?"

Joan peered from cover, gripping the medkit tighter. Cole reloaded.

Medusa's Descent
The dark waters of the past swallowed them as they entered the Hall of Ancient Oceans. Fossilized ammonites spiraled across the walls, breathing secrets from another age. Shattered display cases littered the floor—someone had torn through them in a frenzy.

Medusa trailed behind. His usual fluid movements were gone. Tentacles twitched erratically. Skin pulsed with sickly violet-yellow patches. His eyes—the last flicker of human thought—clouded over.

Then—he jerked like he'd hit a wall. Claws dug into his own temples.

"Ghh—ah!"

Not a scream. A groan, ripped from the depths of his mutated throat.

Cole turned:

"Jan? What's wrong?"

Colors bled. Voices—thousands—merged into a howl inside Medusa's skull.

"So happy, so glad, my trichomonas is bad... gonococcus hops, skip and flop!" His voice pitched unnaturally high, shredded by madness.

Jarek smirked, twirling a finger at his temple. "Welp. Our squid's officially lost it."

Thiery's eyes darted over Medusa's changing body:

Scales thickening

Claws lengthening

Bone spikes erupting from his skull

Electrical feedback? Psychic backlash? Or... is he truly slipping away?

Joan clutched her medkit but hesitated.

Medusa swayed. His form warped in real time. Cole stepped forward, hand outstretched:

"Jan, hold on—"

Contact.

Medusa ROARED.

His eyes—void-black, no sanity left—locked onto Cole. Jaws unhinged. Teeth gleamed.

Jarek raised his shotgun, aiming between those hollow eyes:

"Told you... fucking told you—" Voice trembling with fear and grim satisfaction.

But then—

Medusa flinched.

Awareness returned.

"Wh...what?" He blinked, dazed. Chest heaving, he whispered:

"Sorry... It's... the backlash. From being their antenna. I... I can't hold on much longer."

Joan rushed forward, injecting a sedative:

"You're not alone. We won't let you go."

The Nail-Men.

Once, they were human. Workers, maybe—carpenters, welders, laborers. Now their bodies had become walking nightmares from a madman's workshop.

Their skin was cracked and brown like old plaster, studded with nails driven deep into flesh—as if someone had hastily pieced them back together. One arm ended in a buzzsaw, its teeth fused to bone. The other tapered into a screwdriver blade, jutting from the forearm like a grotesque finger. But the worst part was their stomachs.

Ribs split apart, revealing second mouths—gaping, lined with rusted nails for teeth. Yellow slime oozed between them.

The first one lunged. The saw screeched, carving the air.

Cole ducked. His rifle stitched the creature's chest—it didn't stop. Thiery hurled an acid vial. The liquid ate through its face, but the Nail-Man only laughed, its jaw falling off to reveal a bone saw inside its throat. Thiery put three pistol rounds into its skull. The thing toppled backward.

Jarek snapped.

"Enough of this shit!"

His implants whirred. Hydraulics in his arms and back kicked into overdrive. Muscles swelled, scars turning crimson with strain. He charged.

A Nail-Man swung its saw—Jarek caught the blade and crushed it in his grip. Bone cracked. Metal bent.

"NEXT!"

The third one staggered back, screwdriver-hand trembling. Cole took aim.

"Jarek—DOWN!"

A burst tore through the last Nail-Man's skull. It collapsed, spewing black ooze.

Silence. Just ragged breathing and blood dripping off the saw. Jarek straightened, his implants hissing as they cooled.

"Who's fucking next?"

Joan peered from cover, gripping the medkit tighter. Cole reloaded.

Medusa's Descent
The dark waters of the past swallowed them as they entered the Hall of Ancient Oceans. Fossilized ammonites spiraled across the walls, breathing secrets from another age. Shattered display cases littered the floor—someone had torn through them in a frenzy.

Medusa trailed behind. His usual fluid movements were gone. Tentacles twitched erratically. Skin pulsed with sickly violet-yellow patches. His eyes—the last flicker of human thought—clouded over.

Then—he jerked like he'd hit a wall. Claws dug into his own temples.

"Ghh—ah!"

Not a scream. A groan, ripped from the depths of his mutated throat.

Cole turned:

"Jan? What's wrong?"

Colors bled. Voices—thousands—merged into a howl inside Medusa's skull.

"Sun is shining absolutely, absolutely sun is shining...shining...shining..." His voice pitched unnaturally high, shredded by madness.

Jarek smirked, twirling a finger at his temple. "Welp. Our squid's officially lost it."

Thiery's eyes darted over Medusa's changing body:

Scales thickening

Claws lengthening

Bone spikes erupting from his skull

Electrical feedback? Psychic backlash? Or... is he truly slipping away?

Joan clutched her medkit but hesitated.

Medusa swayed. His form warped in real time. Cole stepped forward, hand outstretched:

"Jan, hold on—"

Contact.

Medusa ROARED.

His eyes—void-black, no sanity left—locked onto Cole. Jaws unhinged. Teeth gleamed.

Jarek raised his shotgun, aiming between those hollow eyes:

"Told you... fucking told you—" Voice trembling with fear and grim satisfaction.

But then—

Medusa flinched.

Awareness returned.

"Wh...what?" He blinked, dazed. Chest heaving, he whispered:

"Sorry... It's... the backlash. From being their antenna. I... I can't hold on much longer."

Joan rushed forward, injecting a sedative:

"You're not alone. We won't let you go."

Jarek snorted, keeping his weapon raised:

"Don't worry. If it comes to it—I'll make it quick. Guaranteed."

Medusa sighed, running a hand over the new spikes along his arms, flexing his fingers—testing how much of him was still human. Then Cole nodded:

"Move out. To the roof."

The night was clear—unnaturally so. Above them stretched an endless starfield, cold and indifferent, beautiful in its cosmic apathy. The observatory dome, once a window to the universe, was now just shattered glass and twisted metal.

Cole stood at the roof's edge, fingers white-knuckled around the radio. Silence. Only the wind stirred the frayed wires of the broken antenna.

Thiery leaned against the crumbling parapet, tapping his scanner impatiently.

"They should've been here by now..." He checked his watch again.

Jarek sat on an old crate, his usual smirk sharpened into a glare. He methodically checked his arsenal—shotgun shells, two pistols, a combat knife.

"If those rear-echelon fucks flake again—"

Then—a distant, glorious rumble.

First, just a vibration in the air. Then—a flickering dot on the horizon. Finally—the unmistakable silhouette of a chopper cutting through the night. Relief washed over them.

Jarek was already rehearsing the ass-chewing he'd deliver back at base. The screaming those desk-jockeys would regret.

Cole mentally catalogued his questions: Who knew about the meteor? Who gave the order? Why were we left to rot?

The chopper drew closer—

"RPG launcher!" Cole roared.

A rocket streaked from a neighboring rooftop. The explosion lit up the night, the fireball swallowing the tail rotor. The shockwave rattled the museum's walls—what remained of the observatory dome shattered in a rain of glass.

Then—screeching.

From attic windows, vents, every crack in the building—a swarm of mutated bats erupted. Their bloated bodies, oozing lesions and tumors, flickered in the firelight like nightmares given wings.

"Circle!" Cole barked, retreating to the roof's center.

The team closed ranks. Jarek fired first—his shotgun turned one creature into chunks. Thiery ducked, his scanner forgotten. Joan's controlled bursts dropped three more—but there were too many.

The chopper's wreckage crashed onto the dome, collapsing it in a screech of metal. Another explosion rocked the street below—the main fuselage hitting ground zero.

Flames bathed the rooftop. In the hellish glow, the truth was clear:

They were surrounded.

The swarm pulsed overhead, a living storm. Cole reloaded.

"New plan. Survive."

Jarek bared his teeth. "Genius, boss. Got details?"

No time.

The first wave dove.

Medusa's Stand. He met them head-on.

His tendrils crackled blue— lightning arcing through the swarm. The lead bats fried, plummeting like stones—but the rest kept coming.

They swarmed him. Claws raked his mottled skin. Teeth sank into flesh.

Jarek and Joan locked shoulders, forming a human barricade.

"Hold the line!" Joan yelled.

Jarek's shotgun thundered, shredding anything that got too close. Joan picked her shots—precise, economical.

"Watch your six!" Jarek kicked a twitching bat corpse aside.

Cole and Thiery held the stairwell.

"Cut off their approach!" Cole gunned down a flanker.

Thiery's shaking hands pulled the last Molotov. He lobbed it into the thickest part of the swarm.

Screams. The stench of burning chitin.

Jarek snapped.

"FUCK!"

His roar echoed across the ruined skyline. He stomped a bat's corpse—again, again— until bones crunched under his boot.

"Who did this?! WHO?!" He spun, shotgun raised—but there was no one. Just fire, smoke, and the wreckage of their last hope.

Shock. Blood.

Medusa slumped against a vent, his tendrils twitching. Electric slime oozed from wounds, mixing with dark blood.

The rooftop was a graveyard of wings and shell casings.

Joan pressed the last bandage against his back, but she knew—it wouldn't be enough.

"Hang on," she whispered, her eyes darting across the sky, willing them to return. Willing this not to be the end.

Thiery slowly circled the wreckage of the helicopter's tail. Metal groaned underfoot, sparks still smoldering in the charred fuselage.

"We need to reach the adjacent roof," he muttered, eyeing the narrow gap between buildings.

Dangerous. Unstable. But their only path forward.

Cole stood at the edge, his gaze sweeping the dead city. Someone didn't want them to leave. Someone knew they were here. Questions churned in his mind, but answers were scarce. Only one clear image remained:

The police station. Three blocks away. Weapons. Ammo. A chance to survive. He turned to the others.

"Listen up."

His voice was steel—commanding.

"We're hitting the precinct. There'll be guns there. A fighting chance."

Jarek let out a tired laugh:

"And then what?"

Cole didn't answer. Because the truth was simple:

They didn’t know.

But staying here meant death.

Cole moved first, his steps heavy. Each breath burned his lungs. Each stride sent pain shooting through his body. But stopping wasn’t an option.

"Attic ahead," he said, pointing to a half-collapsed door—the same one those winged horrors had burst through earlier.

Joan, clutching her wounded shoulder, nodded. Her face was pale, but her eyes still held a spark of defiance.

"Might be supplies there."

Jarek—usually sharp-tongued and mocking—stayed silent. His fists were clenched, his gaze scanning the darkness. He knew: If they stopped now, they were dead.

Medusa brought up the rear, his tentacles scraped raw, deep gashes running down his back. His electric pulses had faded—energy nearly depleted.

The attic door creaked as Cole shoulder-checked it open. Inside, darkness reeked of rot and old timber. Flashlight beams cut through the gloom, revealing piles of junk, shattered crates, torn fabric...

And a corpse.

A large man in a tracksuit that might've once been red and blue, now a grimy gray mess. His body had been gnawed apart—ribs jutting through torn flesh, hands nearly gone.

But in one skeletal grip—a crowbar.

Thiery stepped closer, breath quickening. He crouched, pried the tool from stiff fingers. The metal was cold. Heavy.

A scientist fighting monsters with a crowbar.

The thought felt absurd.

Like something from a childhood video game.

Back when the world made sense.

But the title escaped him.

"What, now you're our skull-cracking expert?" Jarek joked, but the usual bite was gone from his voice.

Thiery just tightened his grip.

"Better than nothing."

Near the body lay a box. Inside—a handful of bullets, a nearly empty medkit, a rusted knife. Not much, but something. Cole packed it all away, movements mechanical.

"We cross to the next roof."

Silent nods all around.

The museum's rooftop was a maze of collapsed spires, gaping holes, and unstable beams. Every step could be their last. Jarek took point, testing the path. Joan covered the rear, her pistol trembling but unwavering in her grip. Medusa, despite his wounds, scanned their surroundings, his tentacles twitching at unseen threats.

Thiery clutched the crowbar like a holy relic.

If I survive, I'll find that game.

A stupid thought—but it kept him grounded.

Cole led them. His eyes never left the target—the adjacent roof, where escape (or another trap) might wait.

But stopping wasn’t an option.

The Jump

Wind howled through the Gothic masonry, stealing curses from their lips and hurling them into the void. The roof underfoot was treacherous—crumbling tiles, groaning beams warning: One wrong step, and you’ll fall. Straight through shattered stained glass and bones.

Cole crouched at the edge, gauging the gap.

"Two meters. We jump."

Jarek snorted, gripping his shotgun.

"And if we miss?"

"At least we won’t need to bury you," Thiery muttered, adjusting his glasses. His fingers flexed around the crowbar.

Joan didn’t wait for approval. A running start—then she was airborne, a pale silhouette against the black sky. Her boots thudded onto the opposite roof. She rolled, dispersing momentum, but stayed upright.

"Clear!"

The others exchanged glances. The plan was simple:

No rushing. One at a time. No panic.

While one jumped, the others watched the skies—in case they returned. The last man would toss a flare—light and smoke to disorient any nearby hybrids.

Cole went next. Then Thiery, who nearly slipped but was caught by Medusa’s tentacle. Jarek, left alone, hurled the flare behind him and leaped. Orange smoke billowed, masking their trail.

The Descent

The next roof was flat, cluttered with vents and rusted antennas. In the corner—a service door, its lock corroded shut.

Thiery knelt before it, crowbar in hand. Metal screeched. The bolt resisted, then—click. The door groaned open.

Cole went in first, rifle sweeping the room.

"Clear."

The maintenance space was crammed with rotting paperwork and broken equipment.

The hybrids had been here. But not now.

A staircase led down into pitch-black exhibit halls—where something lurked around every corner. Jarek entered last, sealing the door behind him.

"Welcome to the rabbit hole?"

No one laughed. They moved in single file, hugging the walls.

Cole—point man, rifle ready.
Joan—rear guard.
Thiery and Medusa—middle (one with a crowbar, the other sensing threats through his skin).
Jarek—tail, knife and shotgun in hand.

Every step was calculated. Every breath controlled.

Shadows shifted—but it was just the wind. The stairs creaked underfoot, each sound deafening in the tomb-like silence.

Cole advanced in short bursts—five steps, pause, scan, repeat. Muscle memory. Never stop moving. Never rush blindly.

Joan kept glancing back, finger tapping her foregrip—a nervous habit even years of service couldn't break.

Medusa's tentacles quivered, detecting vibrations in the air.

"Wait," he hissed.

They froze.

Above them—scritch-scratch of claws on metal. A wet, rattling breath. Then—the sounds faded.

Jarek shifted impatiently.

"Fucking haunted house tour," he muttered—too loud.

Cole shot him a glare.

Ground Floor
The first-floor lobby might've once been bustling. Now—just glass shards underfoot and claw marks on the walls.

Jarek headed for the main doors, boot raised to kick—

"Stop!" Medusa's tentacle snapped out, halting him. "Alarm's armed. Kick it, and you'll wake the whole museum."

Jarek looked with disgust at Medusa's elongated tentacle and snapped back
"Don't you dare touch me with your fucking appendages, you freak. Do that again, and I'll rip them off!

Medusa, who had previously endured all of the Pole's harsh jokes and unpleasant remarks directed at him, growled quietly, looking Ovitz straight in the eye.
“First of all, my name is Jan, not freak. Second, if it weren't for my ‘appendages,’ you would have been dead long ago...”

Jarek smirked, but something dangerous flashed in his eyes.

“We would have managed without your help.” He took a step forward, deliberately invading the mutant's personal space. “And yes... If it weren't for your tentacles, the guys from the helicopter would still be alive.”

Cole wedged himself between them before Jarek could grab his knife.
“Ovitz, stand down!” His voice cut like a blade. “It wasn't Jan who shot down the chopper, it was something else, damn it.”

Thiery was already at the control panel, wiping his glasses. "Give me a minute." His fingers hovered over the keys. "Non-standard system... But I’ll try."

Cole took position by the stairs, rifle braced. "Joan—right flank. Ovitz—watch the hall."

Jarek reluctantly obeyed, drumming his fingers on his shotgun. "How long’s this gonna—?"

"Quiet," Joan whispered.

Somewhere deep in the building—thud.

Everyone tensed. No follow-up.
Thiery licked dry lips. "Almost... There!"

A soft click. The panel blinked green.

"We’re in."

The doors hissed open with a quiet sigh. Fresh night air rushed into the musty chamber, carrying the promise of freedom. And in that instant—shadow fell from above.

The ground shook under the weight of its landing. It rose before them. The Guardian.

Three meters of rusted armor fused with flesh. A sword—jagged, monstrous, stained with old blood—scraped against stone, sparking. The team froze. Even their breath stopped.

The Guardian lifted its head. Its maw split open in a silent roar.

They had disturbed its rest. Now they would die.

Cole reacted first:

"Scatter!"

The team dove aside as the sword slammed into the ground where they'd stood. Stone shattered like glass.

Jarek rolled, bringing his shotgun up. Boom.

Buckshot ricocheted off the Guardian's chest plate, leaving only scratches.

"Fuck!"

Joan crouched behind a broken pillar, firing into a gap in the armor. Two shots. One—a ricochet. The second—a hit. The Guardian roared, turning on her.

Thiery hurled a stun grenade.

The blast deafened them all. For a second, hope flickered—maybe the beast would be stunned.

No such luck. The Guardian only shook itself, its left arm twitching. Bones cracked. Skin split, revealing raw muscle.

In seconds, the arm morphed—into a massive, spiked claw like that of a giant crab. It swung.

Joan couldn't dodge in time.

The blow crushed her ribs, hurling her across the hall. She slammed into the wall, blood spraying from her lips. Cole lunged for her—but the Guardian was already turning on Thiery.

The claw seized his leg, lifting him. Thiery screamed, fumbling for his knife.

Medusa charged.

His tentacles crackled with electricity. Strike after strike, they coiled around the armor, burning through metal. The Guardian staggered—then swung.

The sword whistled, sliced through the air above one of the tentacles.

The Medusa dug its claws into his skull. A surge of electricity exploded inward.
The Guardian convulsed, eye sockets flaring crimson. For a heartbeat, it seemed to fall—

Then it howled, dropping Thiery. Cole fired into its back. Useless.

The claw swung and dug into Medusa's shoulder. A fountain of blood, a scream — but the mutant broke free, crawling away, leaving a trail of blood behind him. The Guardian flung him aside, whirling on Cole.

The claw closed around his throat. Lifted. Squeezed.

"Cole!" Jarek fired a shotgun blast into the monster's head.

The Guardian reeled, dropping Cole—but the claw was already mutating further. Spikes lengthened, edges sharpened. Ready for the final strike.

Thiery, limping, snatched what he'd found on the floor. A knight's dagger. Ancient. But sharp.
He lunged, driving the blade into a gap in the armor. Twisted. Where flesh still lived.

The Guardian stilled. Shuddered. Its sword clattered to the ground. The claw crumbled apart.

Thiery grabbed the monster's gigantic sword. The blade was impossibly heavy, as if forged for a giant.

He screamed—out of rage, despair, and pain—and plunged the blade into the monster's neck.

The strike.

Not on the first try. Not on the second. The metal slid across the armor, sparking, but Thiery kept striking until the blade finally severed the last tendons.

The head flew off, hit the floor, and rolled away, leaving a trail of black slime behind it.

The giant fell to his knees, then forward, like a felled oak tree. The body was still twitching, but these were just the reflexes of dead flesh. Heavy breaths. Blood pooling on stone.
Joan pushed herself up, clutching broken ribs. Jarek was still aiming at the dead body.

Cole stepped to Thiery, eyeing the dagger.

"Good strike."

Thiery nodded, shaking. Medusa examined his wounded shoulder. The flesh was slowly tightening, the muscle fibers were weaving back together, but the pain still burned like hellfire, reminding him of every movement.

The October night met them with an icy gasp. Air—clean and sharp after the museum's rot—burned their lungs, but with it came relief. They were under open sky, not trapped in stone halls of nightmares.

The museum courtyard was a graveyard of half-restored relics:
A crumbling fountain, dry and choked with weeds. A massive gear, rusted teeth glinting under moonlight like a dead titan's bones. A steel rocket statue, its shadow stretching like a leaping specter.
Cole raised a fist.

"Three blocks to the police station. Fast. Quiet. No stops."

His voice was hoarse but clear. They moved.

The Run Through Hell.

First street: Shattered storefronts. Wrecked cars. Bloodstains on asphalt. They ran in formation—Cole leading, Joan covering the rear, Medusa and Thiery in the center, Jarek flanking, shotgun ready.

A shadow darted between buildings. All froze, pressing against a wall.

"Steady..." Cole clenched his fist.

The creature didn't emerge. Maybe it missed them. Maybe something distracted it.

They ran on. Second street...

The Smoldering Chopper.

They slowed, disbelief rooting them to the spot. The wreckage still smoked, sparks crackling along the crumpled fuselage.

"Who... who did this?" Thiery couldn't stop the question.

"Wish I knew." Cole surged forward.

Medusa lagged behind.

He stopped, his gills sucking in the acrid smoke. For the first time in months, he had stepped into open space.

Before the disaster, he had hidden in the museum, afraid of himself and those outside. But now…

A yellow glow of streetlights flashed in his mind.

People. Laughter. The rumble of cars. He’s rushing to work, clutching a paper cup of coffee. "At Mariana’s"—the best espresso in town.

Was that real? Or just a dream?

Now, the sign dangled from a single chain, creaking in the wind. Behind the shattered glass—an overturned chair, signs of a struggle, dried blood on the tiles.

"I… used to go there. Got coffee," he whispered.

He raised his hands—clawed, covered in violet scales.

How did this happen?

Memories tore apart like film on an old cassette.

He’s sitting at that very table by the window. A girl stands across from him, smiling. Her name… her name…

The tentacles on his back twitched, as if reacting to the pain in his temples.

"No. No, no, no—"

He jerked his head, feeling his brain trying to piece itself back together, but the fragments wouldn’t fit.

"Jan!" Joan grabbed his arm. "You okay?"

He took a deeper breath, feeling the chill of her fingers through his scales.

"Yeah… Yeah, I'm here."

But as they ran on, he glanced back at the café one last time.

Mariana…

The name surfaced from nowhere. She always added cinnamon.

Third Street

When the police station came into view—an old brick building with shattered windows and a crooked sign—a screech tore through the air.

Something lurched from the alley—a hulking, bull-like creature with front legs fused to concrete blocks, claws scraping asphalt to shreds.

"RUN!" Cole wheeled around to cover them. They bolted for the station doors.

Jarek fired a suppressing burst—slowing the thing down. Joan reached the entrance first, blew the lock off with a single shot—the door gave way.

The screech of heavy hinges echoed through empty halls as they piled inside. Cole slammed it shut behind them, immediately shoving a filing cabinet against it. Joan worked fast—throwing every bolt, her hands shaking not from fear but the adrenaline still burning in her veins.

Outside, something slammed into the walls. Scraped claws down metal.

But the door held. Dark. Dusty. Quiet.

Cole leaned against the wall, eyes shut.

"We're here."

The unspoken question hung thick: For how long?

The Armory.

The basement stairs groaned under Jarek's weight. His flashlight beam landed on a reinforced door:

"WEAPONS LOCKER // AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY."

Two rifle-butt strikes later—the lock shattered.

Thiery froze in the doorway, glasses reflecting the glint of row after row of pristine firearms. Rifles. SMGs. Shotguns—all waiting like gifts. Ammo crates. Grenade racks. Tactical vests.

"Holy shit." Jarek's voice cracked with relief. He grabbed a SPAS-12, racking the slide. "Well-oiled. Someone loved you." His old KS-23 was dumped without ceremony.

Thiery beelined for the ceramic-plate vests. "For Joan too. And grab more ammo."

Jarek ransacked cabinets—energy bars, a flask of something strong, cigarettes—all shoveled into his pack. "Every bit counts."

A medkit made him grin. "Jackpot."

Upstairs.

In the captain's office, Joan spread a map across the desk. Her fingers trembled tracing their route. Medusa lurked by the sandbagged window, tentacles twitching—no threats detected.

Cole sat on the desk's edge, his rifle never more than a grab away. He wiped soot and blood from his face with a rag. For the first time in hours—his shoulders almost relaxed.

"Think they'll find us?" Joan kept her eyes on the map.

Cole glanced at the barricaded door. "Not yet. We've got time." Calmer than he felt.

Footsteps on the stairs. Jarek barged in, grinning like a madman.

"You won't fucking believe—"

Grenades hit the table. Then ammo boxes. Thiery wordlessly handed Joan a vest. "Should fit."

Medusa stiffened in the corner. Tentacles lashed out.

"Quiet."

Everyone froze. Somewhere outside—a howl. Distant. For now.
Cole nodded. " We need to rest. Then we move." His grip tightened on his rifle.

This respite was fragile—ice over an abyss.

The Captain's Office.

They camped in the only intact room—nameplate still hanging: "CAPT. J. PARETZKI." Sleeping bags lay scattered among case files and spent shells.

Cole jerked awake, fingers clawing for his weapon. The nightmare clung—his wife and son twisting, merging, skin bubbling as three heads sprouted from one body. He'd fired until his barrel glowed—

"The nightmares again?" Jarek's whisper was rough. He perched on an ammo crate by the door, shotgun in hand. In the dim light, his scars looked deeper—carved from old wood.

Cole nodded, willing his hands to stop shaking.

"They stick with you." Jarek offered a cigarette. "Like everything else in this shithole."

The first drag burned—but steadied him. Smoke curled into the dust-choked air.

"We fucked up once." Cole watched the ember glow. "Let those bastards detonate the bombs. Now..." A pause. "Now we make sure what happened here never gets out."

The dim glow of emergency lighting cast long shadows across the room as Jarek gave a silent nod, his eyes glinting like polished gunmetal in the half-dark. Somewhere beyond the door, metal groaned - just the old structure settling in the wind, they both knew.

In the corner, Thiery and Joan slept in their bedrolls with the shallow, alert breathing of soldiers - ready to snap awake at any threat. Joan's fingers twitched periodically, her grip tightening around the pistol even in sleep.

Medusa dozed against the far wall, his tentacles occasionally spasming with tiny electric discharges. The bioluminescent patches on his skin pulsed rhythmically, as if something alive moved beneath the surface.

The remnants of their meager dinner littered the table - empty ration tins and torn packaging.

Sullivan had given up on sleep. Now he sat poring over the yellowed documents Joan had recovered from the sewers, his calloused fingers carefully turning each brittle page. The dry officialese of the first reports told a chilling story:

A meteorite. Recovered from the ocean depths. Something found inside.

The word "pathogen" appeared repeatedly, half the sentences blacked out with marker.

Then came the experiment logs. Photos of mantises with grotesquely enlarged mandibles, lizards sprouting extra limbs, rats armored in chitinous plating.

And then...human subjects.

Cole turned a page - and froze.

"...Hyperion controls the project..."

"...New Earth virus..."

His breathing shallowed.

Were they trying to create a vaccine?

The next page was worse.

"Humanity may face extinction within generations unless the virus is neutralized..."

Then - photographs. Twisted human forms. One file stood out:

Anne Hutchens. Age 25.

Mutation progression:

Day 1: Hair loss.

Day 3: Skin pigmentation changes (violet lesions).

Day 7: Additional muscle fiber growth.

Day 14: Right arm transformed into tentacular appendage.

The final photo showed something no longer human - violet, blistering flesh with yellow, pupil-less eyes and a gaping anglerfish mouth.

The clinical note chilled:

"Subject #10 (Hutchens) became violent Day 18. Killed two guards. Terminated self via tracheal laceration using own dentition. Cadaver dissected for study."

Cole recoiled from the page as if burned.

The remaining documents resembled a madman's scrawlings - genetic formulae overwritten by bloody fingerprints, mutation charts defaced with frantic notes.

One final entry stood out:

"Morozov achieved genome stability. Hyperion will provide full resources. They're invested."

Cole's blood ran cold. Hyperion.

The private military corporation from the «New Earth» briefings.

What did they want from the scientists?

Jarek loomed suddenly over his shoulder, face pale as death, eyes narrowed to predatory slits.

"You said Hyperion?"

His calloused finger stabbed at a photograph - black-clad soldiers flanking a tall man with eyes like honed steel.

"That bastard in the center...that's Sebastian Corso."

Jarek's voice trembled—not from fear, but from barely contained rage.

"If he's here... then we're already dead. Just don't know it yet."

Thiery and the others exchanged glances. Cole rose slowly.

"Explain."

Jarek clenched his fists, silent for a beat—as if the walls themselves might listen. Then, barely above a whisper:

"Served under him once. Congo."

The memory surfaced, raw and blistering.

"Ambush... Twenty men burned alive. Only I made it out... while he vanished."

His voice turned to gravel.

"Corso lost his whole unit that day—snapped. Decided regular men were weak. That only super-soldiers could win wars."

A nod toward the documents.

"Now that madman's playing with meteorite DNA..."

Thiery broke the silence first:

"So Corso's behind this? The mutations? The virus?"

Jarek's jaw tightened.

"Thinks he'll turn men into weapons. The ones who don't measure up?"

His eyes flicked to Anne Hutchens photo.

"Gets tossed out with the trash."

Cole crushed the papers in his grip.

Now he understood. This wasn't disaster.

It was an experiment.

And they? Just lab rats in Corso's twisted trial.

"Precursors..."

The word jumped at Cole—capitalized like a proper name, not some clinical term. His fingers creased the page tighter.

"The genome triggers accelerated evolution. But misdecoded, it becomes a bioweapon..."

Next line, partially redacted:

"...Morozov seized full control. I've been cut out..."

A chill crawled Cole's spine. Morozov. The lead scientist. The man who'd sold his soul for "progress."

He flipped the page—to a satellite image.

The meteorite.

Too perfect. Artificial. Geometric patterns carved into its surface like... instructions.

The next notes scrawled in frantic script:

"Data matrices ready. Backup lab prepped... Fragments secured there. I must correct the error."

Error? Whose? Morozov's? Or the shadowy powers above him?

Cole's pulse hammered. He was holding the key—but not the answer.

Precursors. Meteorite. Forced evolution.

He shut his eyes, piecing the nightmare together.

The photos of twisted test subjects—animals, then humans—lay before him like pages from some grotesque album. But his focus snagged elsewhere.

The old voice recorder.

The one from the old man.

Battered, dulled with age. He traced the tape gingerly—as if it might crumble to dust.

Pressed play.

Static. Hiss. Then—a voice warped by time and terror:

"That tyrant at Hyperion can't be trusted. The man's dangerous, insane—"

A screech drowned the words. Cole cranked the volume.

"...any price is justified for science... military can provide better funding..."

The next words drowned in static before resurfacing:

"The Wells Machine... after we applied the acquired data... restructures human biology at molecular level, enhancing strength, speed, intellect..."

Cole froze.

"Hyperion even began developing armor and devices based on decrypted schematics..."

The recording ended. But a new question burned in his mind:

If they succeeded... what went wrong?

Cole leaned back in the creaking chair, eyes scanning the scattered documents.

The backup lab. The first one—according to Joan—had been destroyed. But if any data remained... Answers might still be there.

Hyperion. The Wells Machine. Enhanced genome.

These weren't just fragments. This was a map. A map to what turned Gorky-17 into hell. And possibly—how to stop it.

The police station toilet. The walls are covered with cracks, like a web of time. Broken tiles crunch underfoot. The dirty mirror above the sink, covered with a film of dust and grime, reflects only fragments of reality—distorted silhouettes.

Medusa stands before him. No. Not him.
It.

Memories. They roll in like waves, carrying with them the last remnants of his humanity.

Jan Kurats. Specialist in deep-sea fauna. A man who once sat for hours in front of aquariums, mesmerized by the shimmering creatures born in eternal darkness. He admired their strange, alien beauty.

It's funny. Now he himself is an exhibit.

A body he didn't ask for. Skin covered with rough scales. Tentacles growing out of his back, living their own lives, reacting to danger faster than he can think. All that remains of him are scraps of clothing. A torn jacket, torn in battle, and trousers turned into rags.

He tries not to look in the mirror. But he can't.

He grabs the sink, his claws digging into the porcelain, leaving scratches. In his head, a cacophony of voices:

“You're not human anymore.”
“You're a monster.”
“You're a mistake.”

One of his tentacles suddenly jerks, hitting the wall. The plaster crumbles, the crack spreads like lightning. He can't control it. He can't control himself.

Rage rises in his throat. He screams, banging his head against the mirror. The glass cracks, shattering his reflection into dozens of pieces. Now he sees himself as many — each shard shows a different part of the nightmare: here — large eyes, here — a mouth stretched into a silent scream, here — a writhing tentacle.

On the floor lies a shard of glass. Sharp as a razor. One precise cut, and it will all be over. He picks it up and brings it to his throat. His hand trembles. The tentacles suddenly clench into a ball, as if trying to restrain him. Breathing. Rapid. Loud.

“Do it. Free yourself.”

But there are voices behind the door.

Joan is arguing with Jarek—her voice sharp, as always when she is frightened. Cole is saying something to Thierry—calmly, deliberately. They are waiting for him. They need him.

“They would have died if it weren't for me. I saved them.”

The shard falls to the floor, ringing. He grabbed it so hard that he cut his palm. But he didn't even feel it. He grabs his head, this deformed skull in which his mind still glimmers.

“How is this possible? Why can I still think? Everyone I knew became creatures. Went mad. Died. But not me. The Frenchman said they could help in his laboratory.”
A glimmer of hope. It is weak. Fragile. But it is enough.

“Maybe... maybe I can still become my old self? But if not...”

If he does go mad, he will do everything he can to protect Cole and his people.
Even if it's the last thing he ever does.

Police Station Archives
The basement darkness clung thick as tar. Flashlights on the desk cast shuddering shadows across case-file shelves. The air reeked of mold, dust, and something bitter—like old paper and broken promises.

Joan sat cross-legged on the floor, dust-caked fingers carefully turning pages marked "First 24 Hours of Outbreak."

The reports were scribbled in shaky handwriting—fear or haste, it was hard to tell:

"Corner of Seyda and Ninno streets... God, I don't know what it was. Looked like my neighbor Jacob but... his skin bubbled yellow. Things grew from his mouth—" The rest was blotted out by ink. Or something darker.

"My daughter... screamed about her back itching. Then... then she grew..."

Joan shivered.

"Like God mashed people with raw matter."

She snapped the file shut, but the images stuck. Tucking a loose red strand behind her ear, she grabbed another document—"Project New Earth."

Thiery turned from rummaging in a nearby cabinet.

"Find something?"

"2030. Eco-terrorists. They released..." Her finger traced the text. "A bioweapon."

He stepped closer, his shadow swallowing the papers.

"And? The city contained it?"

Joan's laugh held no humor. "If only."

She flipped the page.

Photos.

People with violet skin lesions. Children with hollow eyes. Corpses stacked like firewood—someone's hurried attempt to hide evidence.

Thiery looked away. "Christ..."

Silence hung between them like a noose.

Breaking Point
Thiery studied Joan's profile—the tight jaw, the tremor in her hands.

"Joan..." He chose his words carefully. "How do you... cope?"

She didn't answer immediately. Her fingers lingered on a family photo taken days before their disappearance.

"With what exactly?"

"The museum. That girl..."

Joan closed her eyes.

Flashbacks. A scream. Flesh moving wrong. White eyes rolling back.

"I don't." Her voice cracked. "I'm not."

Thiery sat beside her, pushing aside his equipment.

"You couldn't save her."

"I'm a doctor." The words came out sharp. "I was supposed to."

A beat. Then:

"My mother died when I was five."

Thiery stilled.

"Viral infection. Rare. Incurable." Joan spoke evenly, but each word bled. "I remember her fading. Doctors shrugging. My father... breaking."

She turned a page with mechanical precision.

"She didn't deserve that. No one does."

"So you became a medic."

"To stop it from happening again." A whisper now. "So kids wouldn't lose parents."

Thiery suddenly saw past the soldier—to the little girl still clutching her mother's hand.

"But here..." Her fingers curled into fists. "Here I'm useless."

Thiery covered her hand with his. "You kept us alive."

She looked up.

"As long as we breathe—you're still doing your job."

Somewhere, water dripped. Metal groaned.

Then Thiery spoke—not as a colleague, but a friend:

"My father took me to his lab when I was seven."

A ghost of a smile.

"They demoed an electricity experiment. Sparks. Light. I decided then—I'd become a scientist. Fix the world."

Joan studied his face. "He'd be proud."

Thiery nodded, but shadows moved behind his eyes.

"Died six years back. Lung cancer. I..." His fists clenched. "Couldn't save him either."
"And now I'm here. Among these papers. Among these nightmares. And sometimes it all feels... pointless."

Joan slowly reached out, her fingers brushing his.

"No. Because if we give up... who'll save those who can still be saved?"

Thiery looked at her—at her tired but stubborn eyes. He nodded.

"You're right."

Upstairs, Cole reread the lines again and again, searching for what he might have missed before.

"Experiment BT-6213. Codename: 'Alpha-Hybrid.'"

The photo attached was blurred, but the outline of a man was visible—before he became something else. Before his DNA began breaking and rebuilding without his consent.

Cole dragged a hand over his face, feeling the rough stubble and exhaustion etched into his skin.

"He doesn’t remember what he does in altered form," he muttered, skimming the report.

The final entry:

"Incident #51. BT-6213 involuntarily transformed during examination. Killed assistant (Dr. L. Kowalski). Upon reversion—failed to recognize the corpse. Sedation required. Subject no longer viable for contact."

Jarek, sitting across from him cleaning his shotgun, snorted:

"So this freak’s still out there? Turning into whatever he wants?"

"No." Cole shook his head. "He can’t control it. The mutations are random. He could be human... and a minute later—what we saw in the museum."

Thiery, standing nearby, lifted his head:

"Then he’s not an enemy. He’s a victim."

"Victim?" Jarek smirked. "You saw what these 'victims' do? I don’t give a damn if he remembers—if he’s in that scorpion bastard’s form, I’ll put a bullet in his head and sort it out later."

Cole didn’t answer. His fingers found another note—small, crumpled, with coordinates.

"'The church,'" he whispered. "Outside the city. There’s a backup lab there."

He replayed the tape. The voice crackled, distant:

"If you’re hearing this... seek the church. Answers are there. Salvation. Or damnation. I’m not sure anymore."

The recording cut out.

Jarek grinned. "Of course, a church. Where else hide a lab?"

Something scraped asphalt outside. Cole slowly looked up.

"Then we find that church."

The city around them was a skeletal husk—peeling facades, shattered storefronts, rusted cars abandoned mid-street.

The team moved cautiously, hugging walls, avoiding open spaces. Cole led, rifle ready, eyes scanning dark windows, alleys, the black maws of doorways.

Medusa—or Jan, as he called himself—lingered apart. His tentacles twitched nervously, his mottled skin rippling as if something moved beneath. He paused by a broken storefront, staring at his reflection in a surviving shard of glass.

What looked back wasn’t human. Not quite.

Tattered pants hung from his distorted legs. His jacket, now rags, was finally discarded, leaving his torso exposed—covered in shimmering, green-spotted flesh.

Joan slowed, letting the others pass. She watched Medusa—his hunched posture, the way one tentacle absently scratched where his nose had been. A strangely human gesture.

"Jan?" she called softly.

He startled, as if forgetting he still had a name.

"Yeah?" His voice was rough but human.

"How are you holding up?"

He turned slowly. His eyes—too large, too dark—searched her face for lies or fear.

"You remember what happened in the museum. That wasn’t a question."

"I remember."

"I’m scared, Joan."

He said it so simply, so humanly, her chest ached.

"I'm afraid of losing my mind. Afraid of becoming... like them."

He jerked his head toward the alley where something stirred in the shadows.

"I can still think. Still remember who I am. But..." His tentacles coiled tightly.

"But?"

"I forget things. Faces. Names. Sometimes I wake up and don't know where I am. And then..." He dragged a hand down his mutated face like he could wipe it clean. "Then I remember. And that's worse."

Joan stayed silent.

"When it started—" His voice dropped to a whisper. "My skull felt like it was splitting. Bones... they'd break and reform. My spine—" A shudder. "Like it was twisting inside me. Splitting. I felt these... growing."

The tentacles twitched. Joan had no words. Instead, she gripped his shoulder. He flinched—but didn't pull away.

"We'll find the lab," she said. "Answers might be there. Maybe even... a cure."

For the first time in months, something flickered in his eyes besides fear.

Hope.

"You really believe that?"

"Yes."

She didn't. But the lie was kinder than the truth. Ahead, Cole signaled advance. Medusa—no, Jan—straightened his spine.

"Let's go."

Ghost Town
Crumbling apartments with hollow-eyed windows. Rusted cars abandoned mid-street, doors hanging open. Faded store signs missing letters: "Gastrono…" "Meat…" "Pharma…"

Cole led, rifle ready. Every footstep echoed through the necropolis.

"Backup lab," he murmured. "Should have meteorite samples and research matrices. If we recover them—maybe we can stop this."

Jarek's laugh was a dry cough: "So we might not get eaten?"

"Theoretically," Thiery adjusted his cracked glasses.

Joan stayed silent. Medusa brought up the rear, tentacles quivering as if tasting the air.

"Hyperion," Cole spun suddenly. "If they're still here—they'll come for those drives too."

Jarek spat: "So we shoot twice as hard."

Thiery wiped sweat from his brow: "If they controlled the project... why'd it go wrong?"

No answer. Distant, a creaking sign swayed in the wind like a warning: Run while you can.

But there was nowhere left to run.

Ambush
They moved like shadows along bullet-pocked walls.

"Hold," Cole hissed, freezing at a shattered storefront.

Ahead—a junkyard of abandoned cars and the skeletal frame of an unfinished building. Perfect killzone.

Then—

A click. A hiss.

"RPG!" Jarek tackled Thiery sideways.

The explosion shredded concrete behind them. Through the smoke emerged Elmer—three meters of chitin-plated nightmare. His featureless mask leaked yellow vapor from slit-eyes.

"Oh, you motherf—" Jarek racked his shotgun.

Elmer's forearm blades snicked free.

Then Garcia appeared—his serpentine neck uncoiling, skull-like face splitting into a soundless laugh. The minigun in his hands spun up with a mechanical whine.

Bullets chewed through the wall where Thiery had been hiding half a second ago.

"We need a plan!" the Frenchman shouted, gripping a grenade tightly.

And then she arrived. Lucy. The succubus from their worst nightmares.

Her body—half-naked, covered in rust-colored scales—slithered through the ruins like a serpent. Her head split open vertically, revealing rows of teeth like a deep-sea predator.

"They're so... cute," she hissed, taking aim with her rifle.

The explosive round obliterated the concrete block Joan was hiding behind.

"Medusa, left flank!" Cole barked.

Tentacles lashed out, coiling around Garcia’s legs. He roared, crashing to his knees.

Jarek lunged from cover—BOOM! His shotgun blast cracked the chitin on Elmer’s chest but didn’t penetrate.

"Fuck!"

Elmer’s blades snapped out—he charged. Cole barely dodged, his rifle stitching bullets that bounced off armored plating. Lucy laughed, reloading.

"I love it when they squirm!"

Thiery hurled a grenade. The blast was deafening, but Garcia was already up, hurling Medusa into a wall.

Cole’s team scattered.

Machine-gun fire shredded the air, forcing them to dive behind construction debris. Lucy weaved between concrete slabs, her scales blending with rusted rebar. When she laughed, her vertical maw bloomed like a nightmare flower, teeth glinting.

"Such adorable little things..." Her voice sounded like it had been put through a meat grinder. "Let’s play."

Jarek, pressed against a wrecked excavator, reloaded his shotgun.

"Thought only Medusa here could talk," he muttered, wiping blood from a split brow.

Fucking irony. Fucking cosmic joke.

Beside him, Medusa crouched—green, slime-slick skin pulsing. Tentacles twitched restlessly, sensing danger.

He'd take Joan's company right now. Yeah, the redhead was a pain in the ass, but at least she wasn't a tentacled freak. Now? This green abomination he still didn't trust was his only ally.

Lucy's laugh screeched like metal on glass.

"You're funny. I'll eat you last."

Medusa gave Jarek a sharp nod.

"She needs to come closer," he hissed.

Jarek clenched his jaw. Now this freak's giving me tactics? First instinct—tell him to fuck off. Then cold logic won. At range, they were dead.

"Fine. Let's try it," he ground out, barely believing himself.

"C'mere, sweetheart!" Jarek feigned retreat, stepping back.

Lucy struck—a blur of scales and teeth. She fired mid-stride—the explosive round vaporized concrete beside them, showering them in shrapnel.

Jarek rolled behind cover, racking his shotgun.

"Now, bitch..."

Medusa waited. Tentacles coiled around a crane wreck. Then—he yanked. His body catapulted over machinery, slamming into Lucy.

Tentacles impaled her shoulders, pumping venom. Acid sprayed from his maw—melting her rifle barrel to slag.

Lucy screeched, biting into Medusa's shoulder. Black blood fountained.

"Pathetic hybrid! You don't even know what you are!" She bashed his skull against asphalt, flesh tearing.

Jarek didn't wait. He charged—point-blank shotgun blast. Rounds shredded her back scales. No effect.

"Fuck!"

Then—he activated the implants. Hydraulics hissed, metal plates shifting along his arms.

"EAT THIS!"

The punch caved her jaw. Bone shattered. Teeth flew. Lucy staggered—but didn’t fall. Medusa constricted, tentacles crushing like a boa.

Jarek didn’t stop. Second strike - Jawbone cracked. Third. Her skull split like overripe fruit.

Medusa heaved himself up, breathing hard. Jarek eyed him, then nodded:

"Not bad... for a freak."

Distant gunfire echoed—their comrades were still fighting.

But this round was theirs.

Garcia emerged from the smoke like a nightmare given flesh. His massive combat boots - studded with steel spikes - cracked the asphalt with each step. That grotesque neck, long and sinuous like some undead horror from ancient legends, twisted unnaturally, supporting his skull like a scorpion's claw. In his hands - a minigun, its barrels already spinning up with a bone-chilling whine.

"Take cover!" Cole roared, grabbing Joan by the sleeve and yanking her behind a wrecked truck.

A storm of bullets turned the cab into Swiss cheese. Glass exploded, metal tore apart, and Joan ducked lower as hot shrapnel screamed overhead.

"Christ! He'll shred us to pieces!" she shouted, slamming a fresh mag into her pistol.

Cole pressed against a wheel well, his combat-honed eyes scanning the battlefield - wrecked vehicles, piles of rubble, an open sewer grate...

The plan formed instantly.

"Joan - distract him! I'll flank!"

She nodded, then burst from cover with controlled bursts. Rounds pinged off Garcia's armored chest, not penetrating but forcing him to turn.

Critical moment.
Cole moved like lightning, using the wrecks as cover. Garcia spotted the movement too late.

Three point-blank shots. Garcia's right arm exploded in a shower of gore, the minigun crashing to the ground.

The monster howled - a sound like train brakes screaming - and charged, drawing a machete from its hip.

One swing. The car's frame split like paper.

Cole dodged, fired twice at its head - but the skull just jerked back, protected by that scorpion-claw neck.

"Joan!"

She was already sighting. One shot. Garcia's left arm flew off, the machete clattering to pavement.

Cole scooped it up mid-stride. Garcia staggered, black blood gushing from stumps, but wouldn't fall. His claw tightened around the skull, teeth grinding in rage.

Cole vaulted onto a sedan's roof, gripped the machete, and leapt. One brutal swing. The claw severed at the neck, spraying black ichor.
Garcia froze. Trembled... Then collapsed to its knees. The skull finally released, rolling across asphalt leaving a dark trail.
Joan approached, pistol still ready. Cole's ears rang, breath coming hard.

"You okay?"

He looked at the machete, tightened his grip.

"Alive means okay."

Somewhere, Elmer's roar echoed. The fight wasn't over.

Thiery scrambled behind a wrecked forklift, his heart hammering against his ribs. Sweat made his makeshift flamethrower slippery - a jury-rigged monstrosity of welding torch and rifle parts taped together.
Cut off from the others - Cole and Joan battling Garcia, Jarek and Medusa holding against Lucy - he was alone when the scraping metal announced Elmer's approach.

That chitinous armor, mottled in urban camouflage, made the bio-engineered horror blend with the ruins like a living tank. The mask's glowing yellow lenses locked onto him.

"This thing took down the helicopter..." The thought burned through his adrenaline.

Thiery realized: he was cornered.

Phase One: Provocation.
He lunged left, triggering the flamethrower. Fire washed over Elmer's chest - and did nothing. The flames just slid off that armored carapace.

"Merde! He's fireproof..."

Elmer didn't hesitate. Blades snapped from its forearms with a metallic snick, missing Thiery's face by centimeters.

The scientist dove behind a concrete pillar as another strike split the air where he'd stood.

His mind raced:

"Fire doesn't work... Armor too thick. But-"

His eyes locked on the missile pods.

The joints. Where armor met flesh. The weak point.

As Elmer swung again, Thiery did the insane - he charged straight at the blades.

The flamethrower spewed fire directly into the missile pod's housing.

Sparks. Smoke. Then-

BOOM.

Elmer's shriek shook the ruins as the right pod detonated, scattering shrapnel and chunks of meat. But it didn't fall. It got angrier. Thiery was out of ammo. The blades came down-

He dodged, but not fast enough. One slash opened his side - blood sprayed, pain white-hot.

"Too fast... Too strong..."

The machine gun burst tore through the air, punching into Elmer's back. Armor cracked, black ooze spraying from the impact.

Cole stood ten meters away, gripping Garcia's heavy weapon.

"THIERY, COVER!"

Elmer spun—his rocket launcher whined to life—but Cole was already firing.

A second burst.

Elmer's head exploded, chitin shrapnel flying. The body swayed—then collapsed like a felled tree.

Thiery stared, uncomprehending. Cole tossed the gun aside.

"You good?"

Thiery nodded, clutching his wound.

"Thanks."

Silence draped the wrecked parking lot like a shroud. Cole knelt beside Elmer's corpse. The dead hybrid lay in a pool of viscous black fluid, his chitin armor split open to reveal scarred, pallid flesh. On his chest—just below the collarbone—a brand:

Three crossed blades over a broken chain.

"Hyperion."

Memory flashed—documents from the ruined police station. *Project Chimera. Hybridization of A-24 specimens with meteorite genetic material. Enhanced aggression, regeneration, adaptation.*

"Their work," Cole muttered, tracing the symbol. "Those soldier experiments. First successful batches."

Jarek reloaded his shotgun, eyeing the brand with a bitter laugh:

"Of fucking course. So Sebastian Corso and his Hyperion bastards finally cracked it. Started mass-producing these super-soldier freaks." He spat near the corpse.

Thiery crouched, gingerly lifting Elmer's severed limb, studying the unnatural mutations.

"They didn't just splice them with animals..." His voice trembled—not with fear, but scientific fervor cutting through the horror. "Part insect. Part reptile. Part... something else."

Joan leaned against a wall, breathing hard. Her hands shook.

Medusa stood apart, his tendrils twitching as they sampled the air. His green-purple skin mottled with agitated spots, those huge, pitch-black eyes fixed on the corpses.

"They... should not exist," he rasped, voice echoing like it came from a deep well. "This isn't evolution. It's... desecration."

Cole stood, wiping black blood from his hands.

"So Hyperion's here. And if they sicced these things on us, they'll show themselves soon." He scanned the team. "We're close."

"We move. The lab's not far. Answers might be there."

Jarek smirked darkly:

"Or more freaks with miniguns for faces."

No one argued. Reloading weapons, patching wounds, they braced for the final push—into the heart of the darkness that birthed these monsters.

***

The squad moved through a narrow alley, stepping over shattered bricks and rusted beams. Something shifted in the gloom ahead.

"Hold," Cole raised a fist.

A shadow took shape.

A man—what was once a man. His body had fused with a fire escape—metal rods piercing flesh like tree roots, skin wrapping around iron in a pulsing, grotesque union. His eyes, maybe blue once, were now clouded, like dirty ice.

"Go around," Cole whispered.

The hybrid's gaze locked onto him.

And suddenly—he was back.

North Caucasus. Ten years ago.

A dense forest, thick with the scent of pine.

A twelve-man platoon moved like ghosts. Nick Porter—broad-shouldered, his jaw rough with stubble—led the way. Cole, then a lieutenant, covered the rear. Blaze Manovich, a stocky sergeant with a face carved by scars, flanked them.

"Traps set," Blaze murmured.

Porter nodded. They waited.

Then—the enemy came.

Twenty-plus militants, confident, unaware.

The first mine detonated. The explosion tore through the night, painting the forest in bloody light. A militant's body cartwheeled through the air, ripped in half.

"Open fire!" Porter barked.

Hell unfolded. Bullets shredded bark, grenades turned flesh to mist. The militants fought back, but Cole's squad was colder. More precise.

Cole lunged from cover, short bursts cutting down a gunner. Bullets snapped past—one cracked his armor. He didn't flinch.

The militants fell back toward a bunker, covering each other. A grenade arced—Cole hit the dirt, the blast ringing his skull. He was up instantly, putting a round through a wounded man's head without looking.

Ten minutes of slaughter. When the gunfire died, only three remained: Porter, Cole, Blaze.

Ten of their own lay in the leaves.

"Move," Porter said, not glancing at the dead.

The bunker. Buried under rock and dirt, its entrance disguised as a cliff face. Inside—narrow halls lit by flickering emergency lights.

A lab. Walls plastered with schematics, equations, blueprints for devices none of them understood. At its center—a teleportation platform, humming under glowing screens. A machine like a quantum accelerator.

"Grab the data," Porter ordered.

Cole hacked a terminal, downloading files to a portable drive. Blaze guarded the door, eyes darting into shadows.

Then—movement.

A surviving militant, bleeding out, raised a hand... and hit a button.

A beam lanced out—striking Blaze.

"Wha—?"

His body warped, stretched, ripped apart in space—then rematerialized three meters away.

But not whole.

Metal rods jutted from his chest, gut, face. One speared through his eye, exiting the back of his skull. His skin had fused with the metal, as if melted and reset.

"Blaze!" Cole shouted.

But Manovich was already gone.

The militant screamed, adjusting the beam.

Debris teleported midair—nuts, bolts, pipe shards—embedding in flesh.

A fragment sliced Cole's left cheek.

Blood. Pain. He ignored both.

The beam hit Porter.

His leg melted into the floor.

"AAAAAGH!"

Cole lunged for him—Porter shoved him back. Nick took aim. Fired.

The militant dropped—but yanked a lever as he died.

Fuel tanks ruptured. Fire erupted.

"Take the data and GO!"

"I'm not leaving you!"

"That's a GODDAMN ORDER!"

Cole grabbed the drive and ran. Behind him—Porter's scream. Then—an unnatural hum.

Reality twisted. Metal fused with stone. Flesh merged with wiring.

Terrorists melted into walls, weapons, earth.

Cole barely cleared the bunker before the anomaly tore it apart.

He tumbled down the slope, slammed into a tree. Just ringing in his ears.

And blood, dripping from his cheek...

"Cole?" Joan touched his shoulder.

He flinched.

The hybrid's eyes—just like Blaze's.

Cole drew his pistol. One shot. The hybrid jerked, then stilled.

He squeezed his eyes shut—but all he saw was Blaze's corpse, rods jutting from his skin.

"Move," he growled, turning away, fighting the nightmare back down.

***

The rubble-choked streets of haunted city led nowhere. Cole's team advanced cautiously, hugging walls—until a new obstacle loomed: an overturned truck blocking the path, its metal twisted like some colossal force had hurled it there.

"Go around?" Joan scanned the area.

"No time. We push it."

Cole stepped forward—

The ground shuddered.

Something erupted from the wreckage—a nightmare fusion of man, machine, and centipede. Steel plates interlocked with chitin segments. A humanoid head with mandibles that snapped, dripping saliva.

The team raised weapons—

Gunfire erupted first.

A hailstorm of bullets shredded the hybrid to pieces.

From the alley emerged soldiers—ten men in black tactical gear.

And leading them: Sebastian Corso.

Tall. Broad-shouldered like carved stone. Salt-and-pepper hair. A scar bisecting his lower lip, lending his smile a predatory edge. Cold eyes that radiated not strength, but authority.

"Major Sullivan, yes?" His voice was smooth as a scalpel. "Persistent. Pity your persistence serves the wrong side." A gloved hand gestured. "Though I suspect you know who I am."

Cole kept his rifle raised.

"We do."

Thiery flinched when he spotted the insignia on the soldiers' uniforms - the same one Elmer had worn.

"But still... Sebastian Corso. Commander of Hyperion."

Cole kept his rifle raised.
"What do you want?"

Corso smiled - all teeth, no warmth.
"We share the same objective, Sullivan. The laboratory."

"Doubt it," Cole replied icily.

Corso chuckled. He took a commanding step forward, his numerical superiority and firepower pressing down on them.
"But you're carrying something... that belongs to me."

The documents.

"Those contain formulas," he continued smoothly, "Dobrovsky's final research. They allow for clean experimentation... No mutations. No madness."

"Hand them over, and my men will extract you from this city."

A simple deal. Neat. Clean.

"I want to correct past mistakes—"
"You want power," Joan cut in sharply.

Cole didn't blink.
"I know exactly who you are. What you're planning."

"To continue the experiments!" Jarek snorted. "He'll gun us down the moment we're outside city limits!"

Corso looked at him like a disobedient dog.
"I'm not bargaining, Major. I'm offering you life."
"If I wanted you dead..."

A nod to his men. Ten rifles cocked in unison.
"...you'd already be corpses."

Silence. Only breathing.

"Scared, Sullivan?" Corso tilted his head. "Still willing to gamble with your team's lives?"

Thiery intervened:
"You jammed our communications."

"For your own good," Corso snapped. "You don't understand what you're dealing with."
"This doesn't concern you. Don't interfere. The documents. Now."

Jarek exploded:
"He's already betrayed us!" Ovitz stepped forward, ignoring the barrels trained on him. "He won't let us walk away alive!"

Corso recognized him.
"Ah, Ovitz..." His smile widened. "Always too dense to comprehend. In Congo, you saw ordinary men die. Fragile. Weak."

Jarek seethed.
"I haven't forgotten, you bastard! How you left your people to die! You're insane with power! You're a self-satisfied scumbag who doesn't give a damn about anyone but yourself! "

Corso remained unfazed.
"I'm improving mankind."
Jarek was beside himself with rage.
"You're a monster!"

Corso didn't flinch.
"Emotions. How predictable."

His response came flat, devoid of anger:
"Dobrovsky was a genius. I respected him. But he believed humanity deserved salvation in its current form. A pathetic delusion. He kept crucial data to himself. Attempts to replicate his work without the complete formulas failed."

He stepped forward, the burning truck's glow revealing his face - scars, graying temples, ice-cold eyes.

Cole stayed silent. Behind him, Jarek ground his teeth.

Corso continued, almost conversational:
"He came to me himself. Thought he could steer my resources toward 'noble purposes.' But Morozov was smarter..."

A shadow of a smirk crossed his face.
"He understood the future belongs not to researchers, but to those bold enough to act."

Cole finally spoke through clenched teeth:
"And your actions led to this?"
He jerked his chin toward the city - toward mutant screams and wind howling through empty windows.

Corso didn't blink.

"Mistakes are inevitable. But I've seen what losing to weakness looks like."
His voice cracked for the first time.
"Years ago, my squad walked into an ambush. They screamed over the radio, begged for help... while I could only listen as they burned alive."

Even the Hyperion soldiers froze.

"If they'd been stronger... If they couldn't feel fear, fatigue, pain... They'd have survived. Millions just like them die every day. Do you truly want humanity to remain this fragile?"
His tone turned fervent:
"With Dobrovsky's research, we'll create perfect soldiers. And you, Sullivan... You could be among them. Imagine - no pain. No fear. Literally unstoppable."

Then Corso sighed, weary.
"Last chance, Major. Give me the documents."

Cole looked at his team. At Thiery shaking not from fear but fury. At Joan's clenched jaw. At Jarek ready to tear Corso apart bare-handed. At Medusa's pulsating tentacles and bared fangs.

"Go to hell. I won't let you turn the whole world into this city."

Corso exhaled - disappointed, almost sad.
"Pity."

He turned, signaling his men. Hyperion soldiers raised their weapons. Cole tightened his grip on his rifle.

The click of safeties. The dull clatter of ejected rounds. The fight began.

The first burst hit the truck behind Cole, showering the team in sparks and shrapnel. Jarek instantly dropped to one knee, his return fire precise - one Hyperion trooper collapsed, headshot.

Thiery rolled behind a concrete block, launching tear gas canisters - the choking cloud engulfed the intersection, but masked soldiers were already fanning out, executing a hammer-and-anvil maneuver.

"Flank!" Cole barked, and Joan spun just in time to drop an approaching trooper with three rounds to the gut, his camouflage netting fluttering away uselessly.

Through the smoke, the hybrid strikes like lightning - tentacles crackling with electricity lash out, blinding one mercenary. The man screams, collapses, and in a flash Medusa yanks him up by his vest, using his convulsing body as a human shield.

"Light 'em up!" Cole snarls. With terrifying strength, Medusia rips the Uzi from the merc's hands, twisting the barrel sideways with a single motion. A burst of gunfire - another Hyperion soldier drops, throat torn open.

But Hyperion's no pushover. Their leader whistles sharply, and two flankers unleash hell on Medusa. Bullets shred flesh, but the hybrid just snarls and hurls her twitching shield at them like a grisly projectile.

Tactical Duel – Fire and Movement

Jarek and Cole reload in perfect sync, moving like mirror images - two wolves against the pack.

"Flash out!" someone shouts. The blinding detonation washes over them—

But Thiery anticipated this. His smoke grenade rolls perfectly between Hyperion boots just as Medusa discharges through the cloud. One mercenary spasms violently, his partner backpedals blindly—right into Joan's iron sights.

A single headshot.

A Corsican bodyguard emerges from the smoke—only to meet Jarek's combat knife sliding between his ribs. The second guard swings his rifle butt—but the Pole ducks, wrestles the weapon free, puts a round through the man's kneecap before finishing the job—barrel in mouth, trigger pull.

Corso retreats—not flees, no. The old wolf backs away with calculated precision, eyes burning not with fear but cold fury. Jarek charges after him.

The arched alleyway's shadows close around them like jaws.

"You're not walking away!" Jarek roars, bursting through smoke with blood-slicked blade in hand.

Corso spins—his tactical knife flashing emerald, the edge glistening with some venomous compound. Jarek lunges—steel shrieks as Corso deflects, the blade scraping sparks off body armor. A counterstrike to the gut.

CRACK.

Ribs groan under the impact, but Jarek doesn't flinch. His knee crushes Corso's groin, followed by a vicious slash at the neck—a glancing wound that sprays blood across brick.

They become a whirlwind of steel—knives ringing, sparking, scraping fiery arcs through the gloom. Jarek chops downward—Corso parries, smashes an elbow into his face. Nasal cartilage crunches.

Corso disengages, his blade screeching against stone. Then he strikes—an upward slash that misses Jarek's abdomen by centimeters.

Too close.

They circle like rival predators, steel clashing between curses and bloody spit. Jarek takes an elbow to the jaw, tastes copper—but counters with a kidney stab. Corso roars—not from pain, but rage.

"You could've joined us!" Corso hisses, pinning Jarek down. "Power or death, Ovitz. You chose death."

Jarek's fist obliterates Corso's front teeth in reply. The molar bounces into darkness.

Closer to Death

A guttural snarl. Not pain—pure fury. Corso's punch folds Jarek over, but the Pole locks a blood-slicked hand around his throat.

They freeze—eye to eye.

"I'll kill you..." Jarek gurgles through a mouthful of blood.

"Try..." Corso's smirk vanishes as his fingers find pistol grip.

Then—BOOM.

The alleyway erupts. Concrete shatters as something massive crashes through the smoke—a nightmare hybrid with its skull bolted to hydraulic limbs by four steel rods. A minigun-arm whirs to life, its rotary barrels chewing two Hyperion flankers into crimson mist before their bodies hit the ground.

Corso's gaze flicks between Jarek, the Marionette, and the new horrors emerging from side streets—drawn by the scent of battle.

"Until next time," Corso shouted before vanishing into the smoke, leaving his men to die.

Jarek lunged after him, but a strong hand yanked him back.

"Enough!" Cole's voice cut through the chaos. "We're leaving. Now."

They plunged into the darkness as the screams of Hyperion soldiers being torn apart by hybrids echoed behind them.

The sun, red as an open wound, bled across the horizon, painting the ruins in crimson.

Jarek led the way, but his mind was elsewhere. His ears rang—not from gunfire, but from ghosts.

Flashback: Congo

Rain. Sticky, hot, like blood. They marched in formation, twenty men—the elite Hyperion squad, the best of the best. Corso led them, confident, impenetrable. They did not expect an ambush.

And then — hell. Bullets whistled through the foliage, explosions tore up the ground. Masked figures emerged from the shadows of the trees — mercenaries, trained, cold-blooded. The first volley mowed down three fighters.

“Take cover!” Corso yelled, but it was too late.

Jarek darted behind a tree trunk and felt a bullet tear a piece of camouflage from his shoulder. Blood. He saw his men fall. He saw them being shot, one after another, choking in the mud, clutching their wounds. Twenty men. Twenty lives.

Corso fired, reloaded, fired again. His face was contorted with rage.
But their ranks were dwindling. Jarek received his first wound—a bullet entered his side, burning his ribs. The second shattered his knee. He collapsed, gritting his teeth, but continued to fire. He couldn't die here. Not like this.

When it was all over, Corso stood over the bodies of his fighters, his eyes empty. He walked over to one of his seriously wounded soldiers and shot him in the head.
“They were weak,” he whispered. “People are always weak.”
He stared into the distance, as if he saw something no one else could see.
“We need to become stronger. We need to... change.”

Sebastian approached Jarek and pointed the barrel at his face. He stood there, staring into space. Ovitz closed his eyes, but then Corso lowered the barrel and simply disappeared somewhere into the jungle. And then Jarek realized that his commander had gone mad. He remembered. He remembered how Corso had left him to die. He remembered how he himself had survived — through pain, through blood, through hatred.

A month later, Jarek stood in front of the mirror, looking at the surgical scars on his body. Steel threads woven into his muscles. Implants that allowed him to crack skulls with his bare hands.
But he didn't become a monster like Corso. He remained human.

Jarek blinked back to the present. His fists clenched involuntarily. Cole watched but didn't ask. He knew that look—the look of a betrayed man.

His own thoughts crept in like shadows.

He hadn't wanted this. Hadn't wanted to feel again. After the virus took his family, he'd buried not just them—but himself. Became a machine. A soldier. No attachments. No weaknesses.

And yet...

His gaze flicked to Joan, jaw set as she bandaged a wound. To Thiery, hauling an extra ammo pack despite his injuries. Even to Medusa—no longer human, still fighting for them.

"Damn it."

Cole tightened his fists. He couldn't break. Not now.

Medusa lagged behind. His body ached, mutation writhing under his skin, reshaping bone and flesh. The crest on his head burned like hot needles. He reached to scratch it with a tentacle—only for the bullet-mangled limb to twitch uselessly. With a snarl, he raked claws across the crest, leaving bloody streaks.

He didn't know when he'd lose himself completely. But while his mind stayed clear, he'd keep moving.

Joan noticed, slowing her pace. "Getting worse?"

Medusa shook his head, but pain glinted in his eyes. Not human. Not monster. Something in between.

Cole halted, pointing ahead.

"The church."

A half-collapsed door led to the crypt. "Lab's down there."

Jarek barked a laugh. "Of course it's in a damn crypt." His voice was rough with exhaustion—and something that made Cole really look at him for the first time.

"Holding up?" Cole asked quietly.

Jarek stilled. Then nodded.

"Till the end."

The fury and pain in his eyes said it all—they were all in this together now.

The church greeted them with tomb silence.

Shattered arches bled crimson sunset onto peeling frescoes of saints with hollow eyes. Overturned pews. Shattered candlesticks. Icons defaced—every detail screamed that holiness had long been scourged from this place.

Cole stepped inside first, rifle sweeping across glass-littered stone. Expecting hybrids. Expecting Corso's men.

The nave stood empty.

Then—a scrape behind him.

Jarek dropped to his knees.

Not before an altar—but before a shattered angel statue, its wings broken off. His lips moved soundlessly, fingers clutching a pendant on his chest—a rusted cross Cole hadn't noticed before.

"You... religious?" Cole asked, hearing his own awkwardness.

Jarek didn't answer right away. He dragged a hand down his face, leaving a grimy streak, and laughed quietly:

"No."

Then stood, cracking his knuckles, and looked at Cole. His eyes held a strange mix of anger and weary sadness.

"My father was a priest."

Cole hadn't expected that.

"Village near Wrocław," Jarek continued, kicking a stained-glass shard. "Sundays—sermons about love and forgiveness. Mondays—beat me and my mother with a belt for the smallest shit. Then he'd recite psalms and call it God's will."

"What... did you do?" Joan asked softly.

Jarek bared his teeth—not a smile, a snarl.

"Broke his nose once."

Water dripped somewhere, the echo bouncing through the hollow nave.

"Seventeen years old. He fell, choking on blood, and I... just walked. Never saw him or my mother again."

Jarek clenched his fists, staring at the altar's crooked crucifix—Christ's leg snapped off.

"How could a bastard like that preach about God?" His voice wavered, then hardened. "That's why I joined the army. Thought at least they'd call you shit to your face."

Cole stayed silent. This wasn't just a story. It was the key to Jarek—volatile, uncontainable, furious.

His father taught him to hate hypocrisy. The army—to hate weakness. And Corso...

"God was silent then. Silent now. But if He's there..."

He glanced at the broken cross.

"...let Him see what His world's become."

Thiery laughed suddenly—sharp, bitter.

"Mon ami, if God exists—" He gestured toward the city. "—He's clearly rooting for the hybrids."

Joan said nothing. She stepped to Jarek, gripped his shoulder—soldier to soldier. He smirked, spat on the floor, and turned to the crypt entrance.

"Well, boss? Ready to meet the devil?"

Cole didn't answer. He studied the ruined church, the saints' hollow eyes, Jarek already striding ahead like nothing happened.

For the first time in years, he felt the distance he'd so carefully kept—crumbling.

"Lab's in the crypt," he said, changing the subject, but his voice lacked its usual edge.

Jarek took a last look at the desecrated church.

"Fitting place for the apocalypse."

They moved forward, leaving behind the shadow of a God who might've never heard their prayers.

The church crypt reeked of damp and decay.

The team advanced cautiously, flashlights revealing peeling frescoes of eyeless saints, shattered coffins, bones scattered like someone fled in a hurry.

"Here." Thiery knelt, shoving debris aside. Beneath—a wide metal hatch with a tarnished plate:

"ACCESS FORBIDDEN."

Cole and Jarek exchanged glances. The Pole nodded, hefting the crowbar they'd found on the museum roof.

A screech of metal—the hatch yawned open, revealing an elevator shaft.

The elevator was cramped, rusted, mesh instead of glass. As they descended, the car shuddered, inching downward.

"Dobrovsky sure loved cozy spaces," Jarek muttered, pressing against the wall.

Thiery tapped his rifle nervously. Joan listened to the cables' groan. Cole watched the floor indicator: B3, B4...

A jolt.

The elevator stopped.

"Fuck!" Jarek slammed a fist into the wall.

Cole was already reaching for the emergency ceiling hatch when he heard it—
A faint, stuttering scrape. He turned.

Medusa was convulsing. His tentacles spasmed, claws screeching against the metal floor.

"Not now..." the hybrid hissed, clutching his head like it might explode. His brain felt like a Rubik's Cube being violently twisted apart and reassembled at impossible speeds.

Joan crouched beside him, hand outstretched:
"Hold on, we're almost—"

A tentacle lashed around her throat.

"Ghk—!" She gagged, fingers scrabbling at the slick flesh.

Jarek moved like lightning—his shotgun stock CRACKED into Medusa's skull with a wet thunk.

"I FUCKING TOLD YOU!" he roared, swinging again. "TOLD YOU HE'D TURN ON US!"

Medusa reeled back, grip loosening. Joan collapsed, coughing.

The hybrid rose slowly. His eyes—no longer human, too black, too deep—looked through them.

"I... lost," he rasped. "He was right. Can't... control it anymore."

Thiery stepped forward:
"Wait, we can—"

"NO." Medusa's voice was final. "You don't understand. I feel it growing inside me. Soon... I won't be able to stop."

Jarek stood coiled, ready to strike again.
"So what? We just let you walk?" he snarled. "So you can come back and rip our throats out?"

Medusa looked at him. Direct.

"I'm… leaving."

"Then FUCK OFF already!" Jarek's shout echoed into the void.

Silence. Then the hybrid turned, tentacles slithering along the walls as he vanished into the shaft's shadows.

Their flashlights carved through the gloom, revealing:

Crumbling arches, wires dangling like vines, murky puddles reflecting their warped silhouettes

They walked in silence. Four now. No more tentacles. No more electric pulses. No one who could see in the dark.

Thiery (second in line) obsessively tapped at his tablet—its glow highlighting his feverish calculations:

Tentacles... Flexibility... Bioelectricity...

Schematics flashed through his mind—an exosuit with hydraulic manipulators. Armor-piercing. Shock-capable. If only we could replicate his biomechanics...

But Medusa was gone. And that burned most of all.

Cole led, jaw clenched. His light barely pierced the tunnel's throat.

"Documents. Lab. End this."

Yet his thoughts circled back:

Tentacles around Joan's neck.

Those black-hole eyes devoid of humanity.

Joan trailed last, steps quieter than usual. Her fingers kept drifting to the red welts on her throat. Not fear. Guilt.

"Could I have done something different?"

Jarek didn't look back. No regrets. No doubts.

"Quit walking like it's a fucking funeral," he finally spat. "He made his choice."

Joan's voice was ice:
"You happy?"

No answer.

"He was one of us," Thiery muttered, still glued to his screen.

"He was a threat," Jarek snapped. "And we all knew it."

Cole stopped. His shadow loomed like a specter on the wall.
"Enough. He's gone. We move forward."

Joan caught up with Sullivan. Ovitz and Thierry trailed a little behind.

“Why didn’t you try to stop him?” she asked. “That lab we’re looking for… it must have something. Something that might have helped him. Gained control over the mutations. Maybe even reversed them.”

Cole didn’t turn around. His reply was as clipped as his footsteps.

“Kurats become unpredictable. He almost broke your neck back there, if not for Jarek.” He paused. “I’m truly sorry about Jan. But my duty is to minimize risks to the lives that can still be saved. This damned mission has already claimed too many good people. I won’t add to that list out of my own foolishness. If I let emotions take over, I’ll make the wrong call, and someone dies. It’s that simple, McFadden.”

Joan moved closer.

“I noticed something back in the slums. When we found that poor soul fused to the stairs. You ordered everyone back. I saw it in your eyes when you looked at him. You’ve seen something like that before, haven’t you?”

Cole finally turned to face her, his gaze holding hers.

“You’re very perceptive, Joan. That’s worth more than just knowing how to stitch a wound. I’ve seen you talking with Jan. Trying to help him. How you argue with Ovitz, and how Thierry looks at you when he thinks no one’s watching.” He adjusted the strap of his backpack on his shoulder. “You’re the one holding this ragtag bunch together. Not me. I’m just the one who leads them into the fight and keeps them believing we can win. I act and think like an old soldier. But you act from the heart. You give them faith in humanity.”

He turned away, his eyes back on the tunnel’s darkness. His voice grew softer, the commander’s steel giving way, revealing old, deep-seated wounds.

“A long time ago, I was still a lieutenant, part of a covert op in the North Caucasus. We walked into an ambush.” He spoke calmly, but each word seemed to cost him effort, as if pulling shrapnel from his soul. “My friends died. People I’d shared a mess tin with, my last round of ammo. One of them was my mentor, Porter. I was the only one who made it out that day, earned this scar on my cheek too. And since then, I’ve understood: a commander can’t afford the luxury of friendship. Strong bonds in combat blind you. They force you to choose between duty and… sentiment. Even with Yarek, who’s been through hell and back with me, I keep my distance. I don’t cross that line. It’s my shield.”

Joan nodded silently. She didn't tell him he was wrong. Didn't say that without humanity, any victory is pyrrhic. She simply understood. Understood the price he paid every day to keep them all moving forward.

He looked at her once more, then nodded toward Jarek, who was walking behind them.

"You know the cruelest irony? That furious Pole, with all his rage and his demons… he has the makings of a real leader. He reads a battlefield on instinct, and men follow him because they believe in his sheer, stubborn will. He just needs to learn not only how to attack, but when to fall back. So there's someone left to return."

He took a step forward, his shadow dissolving once more into the darkness ahead.

The shaft yawned open, revealing a cathedral of rust and ruin:

A technical hall gutted like a corpse. Gears spilling like organs. Wires snaking from torn panels.

And above it all—Him.

The Messiah.

The hybrid was crucified into the wall, his body—a fusion of man and something ancient—pinned by steel rods like nails.

But the most horrifying thing was its head.

A single massive eye, swallowing its entire face—yellow, milky, with a vertical pupil like some abyssal creature. And it was muttering. Fragments of prayers. Psalms. Curses.

"...deliver us from evil... for Thine is the Kingdom... flesh... flesh... flesh..."

Its voice shifted tones—human one second, then screeching like multiple vocal cords fused together. A dozen tentacles writhed around it, poised to strike.

"Jesus..." Joan breathed.

Cole froze, fingers numb on the trigger.

"Fall back..." he whispered.

Too late.

The eye jerked. Locked onto them.

"...DELIVER US FROM THE DEVIL!"

Tentacles lashed out. Jarek fired—bullets sank into gelatinous flesh without piercing through, like stones dropped in tar.

"Fuck!" He dove sideways, but a whip-like appendage clotheslined his legs, sending him crashing down.

Thiery hurled a grenade—the blast tore through the air, but when the smoke cleared, the Messiah stood unharmed, its tentacles woven into a shield that absorbed the impact.

"...Thy Kingdom come..."

Joan shot the eye—the glassy surface only cracked, like ice.

"It's not—"

Two tentacles speared her stomach, hoisted her into the air, and slammed her into the wall.

Jarek rolled, grabbing his knife. Then—it seized him. Tentacles coiled around his throat, squeezing.

"...forgive us our trespasses..."

The eye loomed closer, filling his vision.

Suddenly—
He was a boy again. A dark room. Smell of incense and vodka. His father's roar:

"...our Father..."

A belt whistled through the air.

"...as we forgive those..."

Jarek choked. Not from the tentacle. From terror. Thiery crawled toward him, but a whip-like strike sent him flying.

Cole reloaded, knowing bullets were useless. Joan lay motionless.

Then—

Something dropped from the vents—green, lightning-fast, crackling with electricity.

Medusa.

His tentacles impaled the Messiah's eye. Arcs of current burned through the milky film.

"...AAAAAAMEEEEEN!"

Medusa lunged, his mutated body moving with grotesque, inhuman grace. The tentacles on his back rose like angry serpents and struck.

The Messiah's appendages flared like a crown of snakes, his droning prayers echoing:

"... If I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... death... death..."

Crack.

2000 volts shredded through the Messiah’s tentacles, making them spasm in agony. The air reeked of seared meat, burning fat.

"One, two, three, four, five..." Medusa’s voice wasn’t human—a guttural snarl, a dying animal’s howl. "...time to DIE!"

The Messiah wailed, its giant eye blinking rapidly, but the tentacles around Jarek slackened. The Pole collapsed, gasping, his face purple from suffocation.

"Bella Lugoshi... IS DEAD!" Medusa’s scream split the silence.

Then—he did the last thing he could.

He ripped the grenade bundle from Jarek’s belt. His teeth bared in something too grim to be a smile.

Cole grabbed Jarek’s vest, dragged him back to relative safety.

"Hold on!" he yelled—but Jarek wasn’t listening. His eyes were locked on Medusa.

The two hybrids clashed like demons in a final duel. Medusa struck again and again—electricity crawled under the Messiah’s skin, charring it black.

"...Thy Kingdom come..."

The prayer grew louder. Frenzied.

Tentacles flailed, coiled, tore. Medusa burrowed into the Messiah’s bulk, claws ripping through gelatinous flesh, acid from his maw splashing into the monster’s eye.

A shriek shook the walls.

He shoved the grenades deep into the Messiah's gaping maw, arm buried up to the elbow in that pulsating mass of organs.

The jaws snapped shut. Bone crunched. Medusa's arm remained trapped inside.

"...that I may not see evil..."

Medusa didn't even scream—just grinned, black blood oozing between his teeth.

"Colors delivered to order..."

The Messiah's tentacles coiled around him, squeezed—and tore. In half.

His torso slammed into the wall, painting the concrete in black-red Rorschach splatters.

The explosion came. A fireball ripped the Messiah apart from within, vomiting coils of intestines, bone shards, and meaty chunks across the hall. Yet it still twitched—eye spasming, jaws flapping, the mutilated torso dragging itself forward.

Cole stood.

"Fire."

Rifles howled. Round after round chewed through remaining viscera, smearing it across the walls.

Finally, the Messiah stilled.

The post-battle silence was thick, oppressive—like the darkness itself had settled on their shoulders, pressing them into the ground.

Jarek coughed, throat raw, purple tentacle marks branding his neck. He staggered to what remained of Medusa.

The corpse lay twisted, ruined. Those once-lethal tentacles now sprawled limp as broken wings. His face—if it could still be called that—frozen in a final rictus grin. The crest on his head, once proud, now snapped like a fractured thorn.

Jarek trembled over him. He'd been wrong. So fucking wrong.

He'd hated him. Feared him. Distrusted him. And yet this... this thing, this hybrid abomination... had sacrificed himself. For him. For the one who'd scorned him till the end.

"Damn it..." His voice broke treacherously.

Joan approached silently. Her fingers brushed a severed tentacle.

"Rest now, Jan..." Tears cut clean trails through the grime on her face.

Thiery stood apart, face ashen. He didn't see a hybrid. He saw what could've been. What had been, in the end.

"You..." His voice wavered. "...were more human than I thought."

Jarek's words came as confession, as penance. He sank to his knees.

Cole remained apart, face stone—but inside...

Inside, he burned.

Anton, Seamus, Novak—their deaths hadn't gutted him like this. They'd been soldiers. They'd known the stakes.

But this one?

This one had known only pain. And still chose to save them. Again. Again, he'd lost someone he'd grown to—

Again, the world took from him.

His fists clenched, fury and grief boiling beneath the surface—but he let none of it show. Not now. Not here.

Silence hung over them, bitter and suffocating. Ash. Dust. Death. Nothing more.

They had to move forward.

But none knew if they'd ever truly leave this moment behind.

. . .

The massive gear-shaped door ground open with a metallic screech, sliding aside reluctantly as if unwilling to admit them into the heart of the nightmare.

Decontamination.

Acrid antiseptic jets erupted from hidden nozzles, stinging their skin, soaking into their clothes. The air thickened with chemical fumes, forcing Thiery into a coughing fit while Joan buried her face in her sleeve.

Jarek stood rigid, fingers digging into his rifle's stock. No jokes, no snide remarks—just ragged breathing. Medusa was dead. And now only one thing burned in his eyes: revenge.

Cole crossed the threshold first, his shadow stretching across the sterile floor.

The laboratory was alive. And that was more terrifying than any darkness.

A kingdom of metal and pain.

The facility sprawled across multiple levels connected by steel catwalks. Walls lined with blinking control panels, cables dangling like vines in some technological jungle. The lighting flickered with a cold, sickly blue hue—not illuminating but accentuating shadows, turning every pipe and valve into something sharp, threatening.

High-tech filth.

The hum of generators. The flicker of dying monitors. The intermittent beep of failing equipment.

Thiery stepped forward, eyes darting across consoles, screens, glass cylinders filled with murky fluids.

"This..." He swallowed. "There's nothing human here. This isn't a lab... It's a factory."

He was the first to spot the radiation-marked door.

"Exo-suits," he whispered, entering.

The room resembled a cyberpunk armory—rows of armored suits gleaming with chrome and black carbon fiber. They hung on racks like the flayed skins of futuristic soldiers.

But Jarek's attention locked onto something else. The weapons. Racks holding things that shouldn't exist. Not standard rifles or pistols—something new. Something alien.

He reached out, grabbing a blaster with a green chassis. The weapon came alive in his grip.

Blue LEDs flared to life, pulsing like veins. A rising hum vibrated through his hands.

"Holy shit..." he breathed, feeling energy course through him, merging with his rage.

Jarek bared his teeth, fingers tightening around the grip.

"Whoever's here..." he hissed. "I'll reduce them to fucking molecules."

Cole suited up in silence. The metal chilled his skin, hydraulics hissing as they adjusted to his movements.

"You okay?" Joan asked, noticing his trembling hands.

He didn't answer. Couldn't. Too much already lost.

The final door. The server room.

Dozens of monitors. Half-dismantled terminals. Cables snaking toward a central hub.

The database. The truth.

Cole approached, fingers hovering over the keyboard. He entered the code. The panel blinked green.

"This is it," he said quietly. "All that's left of Dobrovsky. Everything Hyperion knows."

The screen flashed:

[ACCESS GRANTED]

Cole slowly pulled a flash drive from the battered folder—a tiny piece of plastic and metal containing the keys to the most terrible truth. His fingers hesitated before the port, as if resisting what they were about to uncover.

"Here we go," he whispered, inserting the drive.

The monitors flickered to life with an eerie blue glow, lines of code slithering across the screens like digital serpents. File after file loaded, piecing together a mosaic of nightmares. The tension in the air grew so thick even Jarek stopped fidgeting with his new blaster, his fingers freezing mid-adjustment.

"Dobrovsky V.A. - Research Notes. Project 'Dasha's Family'" - Cole clicked the first file.

The screen split into dozens of windows: scans of handwritten notes stamped "TOP SECRET", technical schematics, mutation graphs... But one video file stood out.

Playback.

The screen showed a laboratory bathed in sterile white light. Figures in hazmat suits carefully wheeled in a strange object - a black obelisk about a meter tall, covered in pulsating bioluminescent patterns. The camera shook as the object suddenly glowed from within, casting moving shadows that writhed like living things across the walls.

"Object GB-LN8, recovered from the bay at 4:30 AM," Dobrovsky's voice came through the speakers. "Preliminary analysis suggests this is no ordinary meteorite. The structure resembles a biological container with..."

The video cut abruptly, automatically playing the next file.

Experiment 13-GK/04

Footage through armored glass showed a distorted shadow thrashing in a cage. As the camera focused, it became clear - this was a rat, or rather what the rat had become. Its body was armored with chitinous plates, bone spikes protruding from its back. The creature slammed against the cage walls with unnatural strength, its eyes... there were too many of them, all staring with human-like awareness.

"Fifteenth stabilization attempt," Dobrovsky's recorded voice sounded exhausted. "The genome continues mutating uncontrollably. Unless we find the key to..."

His voice cut off as the rat suddenly exploded, coating the glass in black slime.
Cole switched to the next recording, and the screen filled with Dobrovsky's face - weary, with dark circles under his eyes, but brimming with determination.

"Personal log, day 95. Corso provided new 'volunteers'," he lowered his voice, "But this isn't science anymore. We're creating monsters, and he calls it evolution. If the formulas don't..."

Cole suddenly leaned closer to the screen, his fingers gripping the console's edge.

"That's him," he whispered. "The old man... That's Dobrovsky. But... what happened to him?"

The close-up frame showed those same piercing eyes, those same features. Now it was clear - their meeting in the ruins hadn't been accidental. The recorder he gave Cole, the laboratory... All of it was planned.

"He led us here," Thiery murmured, breaking his long silence. "But why? What did he want us to..."

«DATA LOADING»

New folders appeared on the main screen:

«PROJECT LIFE. REPORTS»
«EXPERIMENTS. VIDEO ARCHIVE»
«METEORITE. DECRYPTION»

«PRECURSORS. THEORIES»

Cole clicked the first one.
Documents. Charts. Photographs.

The initial pages were dry reports on test subjects, trials, side effects.

'Subject 051. G-18 sample administered. After 3 hours - uncontrolled bone growth. After 5 - death by asphyxiation'

'Subject 112. Mutation stable for 48 hours. Then - DNA degradation. Tissues dissolve into amorphous biomass'

Scrolling down.

Then - the breakthrough.

'Day 214. Sample BT-6200. Stability achieved. Genetic code synchronized. Subject retains consciousness and controls transformation'

Signed: 'Dobrovsky V.A., Morozov A.K.'

"Bloody hell..." Thiery muttered, his eyes glued to the text.

Cole switched to the video archive.

Horror in digital format. The screen divided into multiple windows.

First video:

A laboratory. A man in a straitjacket. Dobrovsky in a hazmat suit injecting a syringe filled with greenish liquid.

"Commencing protocol BT-6205," his voice was calm, almost clinical.

One minute later, the subject's body convulses. Skin yellows and cracks, bones break and reform. The man screams - but it's no longer human, more like a howl.

The camera shakes as something tears through the straitjacket.

The screen goes black. Text appears:

"Subject lost. Protocol suspended."

Second video:

Corso in camo stands beside Morozov. They stare at a data screen.

Morozov (grinning): "Do you realize what this means? We can create soldiers who feel no pain. Who regenerate. Who never lose."

Corso stays silent, but his eyes burn with ambition.

Third video:

Dobrovsky alone in an empty lab. He inserts a matrix drive into a computer. Strange, angular symbols flash on-screen—inhuman.

Dobrovsky (whispering into a recorder): "This isn't an accident. The meteorite is a weapon. A message. They... wanted us to find it. The genome of the Precursors was supposed to be the key to defeating the New Earth virus... but that was a mistake."

The camera zooms in on his face.

"The Precursors. They changed themselves. Now they want to change us. "

Cole closes the video. His hands tremble.

“So Corso knew,” whispered Joan.

“He knew,” Cole confirmed. ‘And Dobrovsky knew too. They both understood they were playing with fire.’

Jarek suddenly slammed his fist on the table.

Thiery leafed through the files, his eyes darting across the lines.

Images. Schematics. Translations of ancient texts scrawled on ruins worldwide.

One file stands out:

"Last Record of the Precursors"

Cole clicks it.

Dobrovsky’s translation appears:

"We altered the code. We became perfect. But perfection is death. It leaves no choice. No... humanity. Do not repeat our mistake."

Silence. Even Jarek is speechless. Data floods the screens like blood from a severed artery.

Surveillance footage:

Dobrovsky slams his fist on a table, yelling at Morozov:

"You sold us to the military! Turned science into slaughter! Can’t you see Corso’s using us? These experiments are madness!"

Morozov (smirking, adjusting thin-framed glasses): "Madness is clinging to old principles while the world dies. We're building the future, Vasily. Corso gives us resources. You said it yourself—the meteorite changes everything."

Next file:

"WELLS MACHINE. PHASE III"

Blueprints of a massive device—part MRI scanner, part industrial press. Inside: a human figure entwined with wires, needles, emitters.

Thiery moved closer, his eyes widening.

"Mon Dieu... They are literally breaking people down into molecules and reassembling them..."

Cole scrolls further.

Homeless subjects strapped to chairs. A blue beam pierces their bodies. Skin cracks. Bones shatter and reform. Some explode into gore. Others survive—but are no longer human.

Dobrovsky's personal logs:

Static. Then his voice, ragged:

"If anyone hears this... the backup lab is still intact. Find it."

A wheezing pause.

"Corso and Morozov... They've taken control. They're using the meteorite not to save us... but to forge weapons."

The recording glitches.

"I've copied all data to the matrix drives. Everything we decoded. Maybe... maybe this can be stopped. I hid a large fragment in a secret backup laboratory to continue my research outside of Corso's control...."

A whisper:

"They're coming. I'll try to—"

Later entries reveal:

"Chitin Exo-Suits" – Insect-inspired armor enhanced with meteorite crystals.

"Precursor Genome Weapons" – Blueprints for blasters firing ionized plasma.

Jarek grips one such blaster, eyes blazing:

"So this weapon... it's part of all this too."

Cole doesn’t answer.

Final footage:

Morozov shakes hands with Corso in a lavish office. A contract between them bears the "Hyperion" logo.

Secret correspondence:

Morozov to Corso: "Dobrovsky’s a liability. Recommend reclassifying him as ‘Alpha-Subject.’ His knowledge is too valuable to discard."

Corso’s reply: *"Proceed. Assign ID: BT-6213."*

The worst file:

Shaky camera work. Dobrovsky—now barely human—strapped to a table. His hair’s gone white; his skin wrinkles decades overnight.

A voice off-screen: "Transformation phase initiated."

Then—

Bones crack. Skin splits. Chitinous spikes erupt from his spine. His jaw fractures into mandibles.

A fly. Monstrous. But its eyes—still human—scream in terror.

An assistant shrieks. Too late.

The claws pierced her chest, ripping out her heart in one brutal motion.

The camera fell, but the microphone still caught Dobrovsky's sobs—now human again, cradling a bloody lump of flesh in his trembling hands.

"What have I done... God, what have I done..."

File Four.

Corso stands before three figures in cages.

Elmer. Garcia. Lucy.

They’re not yet monsters—but no longer human.

Elmer (Code: "Armor") – Chitinous plating, integrated weaponry.

Lucy (Code: "Bloom") – Hyperflexibility.

Garcia (Code: "Pincers") – Reinforced limbs, rapid regeneration.

Note: "All three subjects exhibit extreme aggression. Control only possible via suppressor chip."

Cole opened the surveillance logs.

Date: 17.05.35. 23:47.

The screen split into four feeds.

Camera 1: Main hall. Dobrovsky—not quite human anymore—his body warped, scaled, but his eyes... still lucid. He tears through three guards.

Camera 2: Morozov slams the panic button, face twisted in terror.
"He... wasn't supposed to mutate like this!" His voice shakes in the recording.

Camera 3: Corso, clad in the same tactical gear their squad wears now, watches impassively. He doesn't help. Doesn't interfere. Just waits.

Camera 4: The emitter. A massive, pulsating machine surrounded by glass pods holding test subjects.

Dobrovsky bursts in.
"You betrayed us all!" His voice is a guttural scrape.

Morozov grabs a pistol. A shot. The bullet strikes Dobrovsky's shoulder—does nothing.

Tendrils erupt from his chest, impaling Morozov, lifting him, then hurling him into a wall. The crack of bones.

Then—

Dobrovsky turns to the emitter.

"NO!" Corso shouts. Too late.

Dobrovsky wrenches the control panel apart. Wires snap. Glass shatters.

Sparks. A rising hum. Red lights flare.

BOOM.
The main meteorite and Wells Machine have been destroyed.
The feeds whiten out. When the image returns—
This isn't a lab anymore.

It's hell.

Camera 1:
Subjects in the pods convulse. Bodies swell, break, reform. Glass shatters. They escape.

Camera 2:
Guards collapse, skin splitting as bones elongate, twist, become something else.

Camera 3:

Corso retreats. For the first time—fear on his face.

Recording ends.

The server room was tomb-silent.

Jarek’s grip turned his blaster’s grip white. Thiery buried his face in his hands. Joan stood frozen—too numb for tears.

Cole leaned back in the chair, hollow.
"So that’s how it started."

On-screen, a final message blinked:

[BACKUP LAB ACTIVATED. DATA PRESERVED.]

Signed: "V. Dobrovsky."

Cole’s face, bathed in the screen’s glow, was gaunt but unyielding.
"We can destroy the meteorite. These schematics show its core structure. Blow that, and the mutations stop."

Thiery’s head snapped up. His eyes—usually calm—burned with fanatic intensity.
"NO!" He slammed the table, keyboards rattling. "You saw the same footage! Corso rushed it—he was a butcher! But the Precursor genome is the key to saving humanity!"

He grabbed a data disk, clutching it like a holy relic.

"If I can get this to Onirique Industries, we can rewrite the genome! Prevent mutations!" Thiery's voice cracked with desperate energy. "Yes, it'll take years, but we have no other chance!"

Jarek, silent until now, let out a harsh, joyless laugh.

"Oh, is that so?" He stepped forward, his voice a dangerous growl. "You saw what happened to people, didn't you? Remember those 'puppies' tearing us apart? Remember Jan?"

He said the name aloud for the first time—Medusa's real name.

"He burned alive from his own mutations! And you want to repeat that?"

Thiery didn't back down.

"We can fix it!" he nearly shouted. "We're not like Corso! We won't charge in blind! If we do it right, if we study—"

"If, if, IF!" Jarek snarled, face twisted in rage. "And if not? What if in five years we get another Gorky-17—but worldwide? You ready to carry those deaths?"

Thiery flinched but held his ground:

"Jan... Medusa... He got an unstable, raw version. But imagine a soldier who can regenerate wounds! Imagine curing the virus that killed your family, Cole!"

The name hung in the air.

Cole closed his eyes. A storm raged inside him. Images flashed—his wife laughing in the kitchen, his son reaching for him, empty beds in a silent house. His jaw tightened.

Destroy it, and humanity loses its chance forever. Keep it, and millions could die.

He stood slowly, fingers tracing the holographic lab map.

"Two hundred meters ahead—the meteorite containment chamber," he said quietly. "We go there first. Then..."

He didn't finish. Because he didn't know the answer himself.

The Specimen Vault.

The experimental storage wing greeted them with tomb-like silence, broken only by the slosh of water underfoot. The flooded floor reflected emergency lights in blood-red ripples, as if the lab itself bled.

Shattered capsules jutted from walls like empty cocoons. Something slick floated in the murk—remnants of failed creations.

Cole moved first, rifle tight against his shoulder. He saw no threat.

But he felt it.

"Steady..." he whispered, freezing.

Thiery stiffened behind him, tablet trembling in his hands. "No heat signatures... But they're here."

Jarek turned his head slowly. His new blaster hummed, blue LEDs pulsing with his breath.

The air moved.

Cole barely dodged as something lashed past—a flicker of dark green scales, a whip-like tail tipped with bone. A Hybrid-Chameleon. Gone before the shot could land.

"FIRE!"

Bullets churned the water. No target—just ripples spreading on their own.

"Fuck!" Jarek spat, pressing against the wall.

A distorted shadow lunged again. Cole's burst hit home. The creature screeched—piercing, alien—and materialized for one second:

Serpentine torso, arms fused into a stinger-lash, eyes like black glass

Joan gasped: "One of them killed Alpha!"

Recognition flooded her face. Then—gone again.

"Circle!" Cole barked.

They formed a ring, weapons sweeping the room.

A held breath. Then—

CRACK!

Jarek roared as stinger grazed his vest, leaving a fracture. "Bitch!"

At that moment, Joan noticed a fire extinguisher lying on the floor. She made a split-second decision, rushed forward, broke the seal, and pressed the lever. White foam hissed as it burst out, settling on the invisible enemy. The contours of the monster began to emerge through the chemical mist.

“Jarek, now!” she shouted, rolling back into cover.

He turned around, the blaster in his hands hummed, and blue LEDs flashed.

The blaster's lightning-fast beam pierced the air, hitting the hybrid that was taking shape. The creature burst into flames, screaming in a voice that wasn't its own, its camouflage deactivated, exposing its writhing body. Jarek didn't give it a chance — a second shot blew the creature's head to pieces, leaving behind plasma and charred flesh.

The third struck from below.

Thiery grabbed a surgical table—

THUNK!

The stinger impaled metal, stuck.

"NOW!"

Point-blank gunfire. Scales ruptured. Black blood sprayed walls. The hybrid collapsed, twitching.

But the last was smarter. It struck from the water. The stinger pierced Joan's shoulder.

No scream—just a punched-out "Hngh—" as her knees buckled.

Cole moved.

Tactics forgotten, he slammed into the creature, combat knife sinking deep. The Chameleon hissed, stinger rearing back — And Cole rammed the venomous tip into hybrid own skull.

CRUNCH.

The hybrid convulsed, poison flooding its brain, then collapsed.

Joan lay on the floor. Blood trickled from her eyes.

"No no NO!" Thiery fumbled for meds, hands shaking.

"Don't... waste it..." Her grip tightened on Thiery's hand. Black veins spiderwebbed up her neck.

"That girl... in the Museum... I'm sorry..."

Her eyes glazed over.

Thiery wept silently. He knelt on the cold floor, clutching her lifeless hand in his. Cole and Jarek stood over them, the barrel of Jarek's blaster still smoking. The air reeked of scorched plasma and charred flesh, while dark, ink-like blood swirled in the murky puddles beneath them.

Joan lay on her back, her eyes wide and unseeing. Blood—already darkening at the edges—trickled from the corners of her mouth, mingling with the water pooling beneath her. Her fingers remained clenched in a fist, as if even in death, she refused to let go.

Cole stared. This isn't happening. Not now. Not her.

He waited for her to gasp, to groan, to snap some sharp remark like she always did. But her chest didn't rise. Her face had gone pale, almost waxen.

We've lost people before. Always. But not her. Not Joan.

She'd dragged them through impossible firefights. Stitched wounds under gunfire. Laughed through the pain. Argued with Jarek. Been kind to poor Jan. She was—

No. Don't. Soldiers die. That's the rule. You move forward or you break.

But inside, he was screaming.

They'd lost Joan.

The entire Alpha Team was gone.

Then—Jarek snapped.

"FUCK!" His roar shattered the silence, echoing off the metal walls. He lunged forward, kicking an operating table with enough force to send it crashing onto its side, instruments scattering. Without pause, he drew his blaster and fired into the corpse of a dead hybrid.

The weapon screamed. A flash of light.

Chunks of flesh splattered the walls, the creature's remains crumbling to ash.

"Corso’s gonna pay..." Jarek hissed through gritted teeth, his voice trembling with rage. "He pays for all of them."

But then the fight drained out of him. He collapsed to his knees, hands clawing at his hair. A shudder wracked his frame.

Cole saw it. Felt the same fury. But his face stayed stone.

Not here. Not now. Hold it together, damn you.

Slowly, mechanically, he pulled out his watch. Marked the time in his field journal.

Joan McFadden. 00:55. End of record.

His fingers shook so badly his knuckles whitened around the pen.

She wasn’t supposed to die. We were supposed to leave together.

Thiery didn’t move. He sat beside her body, his hands resting on her chest as if he might still feel a heartbeat. He wanted to show her Paris after they got out of this hell.

He remembered their talk in the police station archives. She’d laughed, telling him how she’d nearly fainted the first time she bandaged a wound in training.

"But I decided—I’d save people. Even if it’s the last thing I do."

The irony.

She’d saved them—in firefights, in the catacombs, in this hellhole. But she couldn’t save herself.

Cole knew he had to speak. Had to lead them forward. But the words stuck in his throat.

"We have to move," he finally muttered, his voice hollow.

Thiery didn’t answer. Just slowly brushed his fingers over her face, closing her eyes.

" Désolé" he whispered.

She wouldn’t hear it. Not ever. Now there were three. And the meteorite waited.
...

The meteorite chamber greeted them with cold radiance.

The circular room, resembling some ancient temple rebuilt as a high-tech nightmare, rose into darkness, its walls lined with control panels and cracked screens. At its center, on a massive platform, rested the shard of the Precursor meteorite—enormous, dark, as if carved from the void itself. Its surface shimmered like oil on water, shifting in unnatural hues. Pulses emanated from it—not sound, not light, but something else that made their skin crawl and teeth ache from strange resonance.

Cole stepped forward, his exosuit humming with each movement. He felt the weight—not physical, but the kind that pressed against the mind.

"Here..." Thiery whispered, his eyes hungrily scanning the digital panels around the containment unit. Formulas, access codes, schematics—everything that could save humanity.

He didn't voice his hopes aloud. But his fingers clenched involuntarily, as if already holding that data, already transporting it to a safe lab where mistakes could be undone, fate rewritten...

"Have you seen enough?"

The voice came from the darkness, making all three men flinch—weapons snapping toward the sound.

Dobrovsky stepped into the light.

He was barely recognizable.

His once-intelligent face had withered further, skin stretched taut over ink-black veins pulsing beneath. His eyes burned too bright, too aware, brimming with pain. He swayed on his feet, hands twitching—fingers spasming open and shut like his body no longer obeyed him.

"You..." Cole kept his rifle raised. "We thought you died. Down in the tunnels—"

"I should have." Dobrovsky coughed, black fluid trickling from his lip. "But I couldn't afford... such luxury."

He gestured weakly toward the meteorite.

"You've seen the records. You know what I've done. It was supposed to heal..."

"Then why the fuck didn't you destroy it?!" Jarek surged forward, voice raw. "You saw what it does to people!"

Dobrovsky turned slowly. His eyes flashed.

"Because I'm a scientist."

He took a step closer—revealing how his skin writhed beneath his clothes, something alive beneath the surface.

"Because I believed I could fix it."

Black droplets fell from his nose onto his sweater. He didn't wipe them away.

"Because... I was afraid."

"Afraid?" Cole's finger hovered near the trigger.

"What if..." Dobrovsky raised a trembling hand toward the meteorite. "...this was our last hope? The only thing that might save humanity from extinction?"

Jarek barked a laugh.

"So we should thank you for leaving this fucking abomination?"

"NO!" Dobrovsky's voice shattered into a rasp. "I left a choice! One I never had!"

He clutched his chest like his heart was tearing apart.

"Corso... Morozov... They decided for everyone. Turned people into weapons! But I—"

A jerk of his chin toward the meteorite.

"—hid it where only those willing to bear the weight could decide."

"You played god," Cole accused. "Turned this city into hell."

Dobrovsky closed his eyes. "Yes."

One word. A confession.

When he opened them again, something in his gaze made Cole tense.

"They never wanted control. Built it as a weapon. A tool for... purification."

Thiery stepped forward. "We can rewrite the code! Given time—"

"You've seen the cost!" Dobrovsky's scream was a broken thing. "Held your dying friends in your arms!"

The meteorite pulsed—dead light fracturing across steel.

"Now you choose," Dobrovsky whispered. "Destroy it all... or gamble."

Cole looked at Thiery. At Jarek. At the pulsating mass.

"How?"

Dobrovsky tapped the control panel.

"The termination sequence is in the data. Just initiate it."

"And if we preserve it?" Thiery pressed.

Dobrovsky met his gaze. "Then you're no better than Corvo. Because someone will decide... who transforms, and who burns."

Jarek laughed—sharp as a gunshot.

"So no choice at all."

Dobrovsky said nothing.

He looked only at Cole.

"Decide."

Their confrontation was interrupted by the metallic shriek of doors grinding open.

From the darkness emerged Corso—but no longer the man they knew. His skin had taken on a deathly gray hue, black veins pulsing in sync with the meteorite's glow. Behind him stood a dozen Hyperion soldiers, their eyes vacant, obedient—barely human anymore.

"You still believe you can win?" Corso's voice buzzed like distorted radio static. His movements were unnaturally fluid as he spread his arms. "Humanity has already lost. What happened here isn't the end—it's the beginning."

Cole raised his rifle. Corso only smiled.

"You cling to your fragile flesh like blind puppies to a warm blanket." He stepped forward, his shadow stretching grotesquely across the walls. "We're weak. We sicken. We die. But they..." He nodded toward the meteorite. "They offer us strength."

"Strength?!" Jarek roared. "You call this strength?" He jabbed a finger toward the ruined city beyond the walls. Corso didn't flinch.

"Gorky-17 was a miscalculation. But science demands sacrifice."

Then he produced a syringe filled with thick, shimmering fluid.

"The future begins now."

The needle plunged into his neck. Bones cracked. Muscles swelled and ruptured, rearranging themselves. Skin split open, revealing crystalline structures beneath. His height doubled—tripled—quadrupled. Arms multiplied into four spear-like appendages. His face elongated, splitting into an insectoid head with massive mandibles.

The Incubus was born.

"KILL THEM."

Dobrovsky snarled and charged. His body spiraled through mutations—claws, wings, chitinous armor—adapting mid-stride as he tore through Hyperion soldiers with bestial fury.

Thiery opened fire, bullets ricocheting off Corso's crystalline carapace.

"Aim for the eyes!" Cole shouted, rolling beneath a spear-arm strike.

Jarek dove sideways, his blaster screaming as it discharged plasma. The Incubus howled when the bolt seared its shoulder—but didn't stop.

"*Incubus in my head is controlling my mind...*" A line from some old Polish metal song flashed through Jarek's thoughts.

It was terrifying. It was exhilarating. It was unstoppable.

Corso moved with impossible speed for his size. A spear-hand impaled the floor where Cole had stood seconds earlier, concrete shattering like glass.

"Fire!" Cole commanded, and the team unleashed hell.

Bullets sparked off crystalline armor, leaving only hairline fractures.

Dobrovsky transformed again.

His body ruptured, becoming a wolf-scorpion hybrid—claws, chitinous tail, a maw full of fangs. He launched at the Incubus with the fury of the damned.

Corso gestured—an energy discharge speared through Dobrovsky, cauterizing flesh. Yet he kept coming. His wounds sealed, mutated, adapted.

Jarek knelt, his blaster whining as it unleashed ionized plasma. The world dissolved into chaos and screaming light.

"To hell with your experiments!" he roared and fired. The blast struck Incubus square in the chest, leaving a charred crater, but the monster only snarled.

"He's too damn tough!" Thiery scrambled back, pulling a grenade.

Cole and Ovitz opened fire.

"Aim for the joints!" Cole barked, targeting the crystalline armor's weak points. Bullets ricocheted, but some found their mark—black fluid spurted from the wounds. Jarek ducked behind cover, his blaster whining as it charged.

"Come on, come on..."

The energy bolt hit Corso dead center, the explosion hurling him back—but the monster rose, flesh already knitting together.

"He's regenerating!" Thiery shouted.

"Fuck!"

Corso spun with unnatural speed. A flash of claws—four talons impaled Jarek clean through, launching him across the hall.

"JAREK!" Cole lunged forward, but Dobrovsky was faster.

He'd transformed again—now something between wasp and man. Venom sprayed from his stinger, hitting Incubus square in the face. The monster howled, blinded but still standing.

Dobrovsky rose, his body shifting once more—snakelike now, coils lashing around Corso's legs, dragging him down.

"Now!"

Cole charged. His knife flashed blue—plunging into Corso's neck with a brutal twist. Black blood fountained. But Incubus backhanded him, sending him flying.

Thiery caught him—both crashing to the floor.

Dobrovsky stopped holding back.

"I'll take him with me."

A final lunge. Bones cracked. Skin split. Tentacles erupted from his back, chest, even his mouth—mutating into a chitinous leviathan of unstable, pulsing flesh.

"HOLD HIM!" His voice was no longer human.

Cole understood.

"Suppressing fire!"

They unleashed hell—targeting eyes, joints, cracks in the armor. Incubus roared, blades flailing—but hesitated for one critical second.

Enough.

Dobrovsky struck. Tentacles burrowed into armor fractures, penetrating deep.

"NO!" Corso's scream merged with Dobrovsky's guttural hiss.

Energy crackled between them. Blue lightning danced across crystals. Dobrovsky's flesh began glowing from within—

BOOM.

The explosion shattered darkness. The shockwave hurled everyone down. Corso's crystalline shell disintegrated into dust. His body detonated from within—chunks of meat spattering the walls.

The lights flickered. Only gore and shards remained. No Dobrovsky. No Corso.

Jarek's blood spread across the floor, mingling with hybrid remains. His breathing was ragged, but his lips still twisted into a grin.

"Well, Major..." he wheezed, "that's one helluva bedtime story."

Cole smirked, but his eyes stayed grim. "Yeah. Just don't die before telling it."

Jarek coughed—crimson bubbles forming on his lips.

Cole approached the main console, fingers hovering over the keyboard. The weight of the decision pressed down on him. The termination code. A few digits—and humanity would remain vulnerable. Mortal. But human.

"Pleasure, little treasure..."

A safety clicked off.

"Don't move, Cole."

Thiery's voice was alien. Cole turned slowly.

The Frenchman stood five paces away, pistol aimed at Cole's chest. His hand shook, but his gaze didn't. One lens of his glasses was shattered, blood trickling beneath it.

Jarek tried rising, face contorted in pain. "You frog-eating motherfu—"

Thiery didn't look. Just swung the pistol butt into Jarek's temple—knocking him out cold.

"You can't do this!" Thiery's voice cracked. "This is our only chance! You've seen what's out there! Without this data, we're extinct!"

Cole didn't raise his weapon. He stared straight into Thiery's eyes.

"What if we're wrong? What if this happens on a global scale?"

"We'll correct the mistakes!" Thiery took a step forward. The pistol now nearly pressed against Cole's chest. "But if you destroy everything now—Joan's death will be meaningless. She died for nothing, you understand? For NOTHING!"

The last words hung in the air like a knife between ribs. Cole clenched his fists.

"You think I don't know?" His voice was quiet but storm raged beneath. "Every night I see my wife and son's faces. But if we preserve this... how many more like Joan will die?"

Thiery nervously licked his lips.

"We'll be more careful. We have knowledge Corso didn't."

"Knowledge?" Cole laughed bitterly. "You've seen what that 'knowledge' did to Dobrovsky. To the city. To us."

They stood like that—face to face, mere steps apart, yet separated by an unbridgeable chasm.

Tense silence filled the hall, broken only by the meteorite's faint hum.
Two truths. Two sacrifices.
One choice.

Epilogue

A beetle. Ordinary, small, black, with iridescent wings. It sat on cracked asphalt, cleaning its antennae, carefree, unaware of the storm that had swept through this place.
Then it took flight—only to be instantly swatted aside by the rotor wash of the helicopter carrying the last survivors away.

Cole sat by the window, his face unreadable. Below, the ruined city drifted past.
Jarek lay on a stretcher, his chest rising faintly. Thiery, grim, pulled out a crumpled cigarette pack and clamped one between his teeth. The lighter's flame trembled in the air current. He inhaled, exhaled smoke, never taking his eyes off Cole. The unspoken question hung heavy. Had Cole really destroyed the data? Or...
Had something survived? Cole didn't answer. He just kept staring into the distance where horizon melted into darkness.

Into the unknown.

"ONE LAST DAY IN HELL"

The events of this bonus chapter take place several months before the main plot of the novelization begins, at the very moment when Dobrovsky wreaked havoc in the laboratory and triggered the shock wave from the Emitter.

The Hotel Versailles had never lived up to its name—even in better times. Faded wallpaper, creaky floors, the stench of mildew and cheap tobacco. But today, its owner—sweaty, overweight Leszek Borowski—looked especially pale.

"The hell's this?" Borowski adjusted his glasses with trembling hands. "I paid last month!"

Jacob "Bacon" Slavsky just smirked, sprawled on a chair lighting a cigarette. His red-and-blue tracksuit strained over broad shoulders, his buzzcut gleaming under the dim bulb.

"New rates, Leszek. Inflation's a bitch."

Behind him loomed two enforcers: Marek "Chunk" Nerdinsky—a two-meter-tall mountain of muscle with a face like it'd been carved with an axe—and "Rat," a twitchy, rail-thin guy with shifty eyes.

Borowski started stammering when—

A deep rumble shook the building. Glassware trembled.

"The fuck?!" Rat lunged to the window.

Then the siren hit—not a civil defense alert. Something worse. Piercing. Wrong. Like the sound of the world ending. Then the screaming started. First outside. Then inside the hotel. Someone convulsed in the hallway. Borowski gasped, collapsing. His skin flushed pink—then blistered.

"FUCK!" Chunk stumbled back.

The hotelier's fingers elongated, nails blackening into claws. His ribs cracked, something pushing outward—

"MOVE!" Bacon bolted for the exit—but the door burst open.

The bellboy stood there. Or what was left of him. His jaw unhinged, stretching into a serpentine maw. Arms twisted, fingers fusing into webbed talons.

"HOLY SHIT!" Rat drew his pistol—BAM!

The mutant's head exploded, but its body kept twitching. The street had become hell.

People writhed, bodies mutating—sprouting extra limbs, jagged spines.

"TO THE CAR!" Bacon sprayed a dog-headed hybrid with his AK—it just snarled and pounced.

Rat died first. Something massive lurched from an alley—a bull-human hybrid with concrete slabs fused to its arms.

"NO! NO—"

The concrete crushed his skull. Slavsky and Chunk dove into their tinted-window sedan. Chunk gunned the engine while Bacon laid covering fire.

"DRIVE, YOU FUCK!"

The car screeched forward—until a mantis-limbed horror landed on the hood. The windshield cracked.

"Shake it!"

Chunk slammed the brakes. The creature flew off—but they swerved into a pole.

The hood crumpled. The engine died. Bacon's head bounced off the glass.

"Fuuuuck..."

Chunk already had him by the collar:

"MOVE YOUR ASS!"

They crashed into a nearby brothel—dark, reeking of bleach. Bacon barricaded the door, panting.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING?!"

Outside, a mutated woman in a torn dress grabbed a survivor. Her belly swelled, ruptured—a giant worm burst out, coiling around its prey and ripping him in half. Entrails splattered the pavement as she howled—not in pain, but ecstasy.

Bacon stared at his still-human hands.

"Gonna puke..." Chunk turned green.

They fled upstairs—moldy stairs, piss-stained walls—when they heard it:

Rasping breath. Too many limbs scraping concrete. Something crawled from the shadows.

Three heads. Father. Mother. Son.

Fused into one grotesque mass, limbs knotted into jointed appendages. Purple-tinged skin. Pulsing yellow cysts.

"MOMMY... DADDY... HURTS..." Their voices overlapped, a horrible chorus.

Chunk froze.

"MOVE, DIPSHIT!" Bacon roared—but the abomination leaped. Chunk grabbed a chair—SMASHED it into the mother's head.

CRUNCH. The skull caved—but the thing kept coming.

"TAKE IT DOWN!"

They bull-rushed the monstrosity toward the stairs. It screeched, thrashed—then tumbled, shattering on the steps below. They barricaded themselves in its apartment of origin. Inside: squalor.

The apartment was a dump—torn couch, empty vodka bottles, used syringes littering the floor.

"Gotta be a something useful here somewhere..." Bacon muttered, rifling through cabinets.

They found half a box of matches, two bottles with finger-widths of liquor left, some rags.

"Gonna make Molotovs now?" Chunk smirked.

"Better than dick in hand."

Bacon peered out the window. The old brick Museum loomed in the distance—sturdy as a fortress compared to this rotting flophouse.

"We're moving there." He jerked his chin toward it.

Chaos ruled the streets below. People screamed, mutated. One man collapsed as tentacles burst from his spine. Another got torn apart by hybrids—like dogs on raw meat.

They took stock:

Bacon: AK-47 + metal baseball bat

Chunk: Revolver + dull combat knife + 2 Molotovs

"Ready?" Chunk spun his revolver's cylinder.

"Fuck no. Let's roll."

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Something heavy pounded the door. Wood splintered.

Chunk crossed himself with shaking hands. "Lord have mercy..."

Bacon wasn't praying. He'd spotted the rotted bathroom floor.

"Quit gawking, dumbass! Help me!"

He wedged his bat under the toilet—levered upward. Chunk added his shoulder. CRACK. Pipes burst. The toilet tore free, revealing a hole to the apartment below.

"Move your ass!"

The door exploded inward.

The Fused Family lurched inside, three heads shrieking:
"WHERE YOU AT?!"
"LET'S PLAY!"
"IT HURTS!"

Chunk didn't hesitate.

"Eat shit!" He heaved the toilet—SMASH—direct hit on Dad's face. Porcelain shattered. Brains painted the wall. The abomination staggered—then crashed through the window.

"JUMP!" Bacon dove through the hole.

They landed in sewage and rust-water.

"Fuck... ruined my kicks," Bacon spat.

The bathroom door creaked open—revealing a new nightmare. A man's severed head sprouting six spidery legs, skittering across the ceiling.

"You fucking kidding me?!" Bacon hosed it with bullets. Two legs flew off—it kept coming.

"BURN!" Chunk lobbed a Molotov.

WHOOSH. Flames engulfed the thing, the ceiling, the curtains. The mutant's screeches only stopped when its skull popped from the heat.

They fled through the back alley. Chunk trembled, crossing himself repeatedly. "God's punishment... demons walk..."

Bacon grabbed his shoulder. "Save the sermon. Museum—now."

A scorpion-tailed hybrid lunged from shadows—

BANG. Its head vaporized.

A man in a battered leather jacket stepped from the smoke, pistol raised.

"James Sashmon. PD." He kicked the twitching corpse. "Came to arrest you shits... Plans changed."

"Fuck me..." Bacon groaned.

"Half my squad went nuts. Other half turned into those." Sashmon nodded toward the street where something with too many mouths was eating a traffic light. "Truce?"

Bacon spat, eyed Chunk.

"Fine. Never thought I'd ride with pigs."

Sashmon chambered a round. Somewhere close, a new abomination howled.

Bacon took point, AK up. Chunk panted behind him, revolver slick in sweaty palms. Sashmon covered the rear, his pistol methodically clearing every shadow.

"Hey pig," Chunk rasped, eyes locked on an alley. "You got any fucking clue what this is?"

Sashmon's smirk was grim. "Saw military trucks rolling in before comms died. This ain't random."

"And?" Bacon snapped.

" A few months ago, that meteorite fell into the sea. Remember? There were rumors. And now... this"

Bacon barked a laugh. "X-Files bullshit. Without the hot redhead."

Chunk frowned. "Maybe it's that «New Earth» virus? The one on the news—"

"Viruses don't do this." Sashmon tracked movement in the fog. "This is—"

A guttural growl cut him off.

Something long, glistening, with fused limbs slithered into view.

"Oh fuck me..." Chunk froze.

"Steady," Bacon whispered, raising his rifle.

The creature sniffed—then CHARGED.

Gunfire ERUPTED.

At that exact moment—a fuel truck catapulted off the bridge. It smashed through the guardrail, plummeted onto the asphalt mere meters away—and exploded.

Fuel barrels rocketed like artillery shells. The fireball hit them like a fist, sending everyone sprawling.

Bacon crashed onto his back, ears ringing, vision swimming with black spots.

He tried to rise—and saw it.

The spider-woman emerged from the smoke, gliding through the air. Her lower half—a bulbous black abdomen bristling with hairs. Upper body—still vaguely female, but that face...

Her jaw unhinged to her ears, revealing a dripping stinger. Eyes—glassy, enormous, insane.

"Chunk! Get the fuck up!" Bacon grabbed his buddy's jacket.

Chunk muttered nonsense, crossing himself repeatedly.

"He's... punishing us... for our sins..."

"Enough!" Bacon dragged him sideways.

Chunk suddenly clamped onto his arm: "Sashmon!"

Bacon snarled:

"Fuck that pig! First chance he gets, he'll cuff us!"

Chunk shook him violently, eyes wild:

"Look around, dipshit! What fucking cuffs?! Hell's already here!"

Bacon froze. Exhaled.

He bit his lip, glanced at Sashmon.

"Fine... but if he tries to arrest us later, I'll rip his head off myself."

The cop lay half-conscious near the flames.

The spider-woman skittered toward him, stinger quivering.

"Wait..." Bacon sighted his AK.

Chunk rolled a fuel barrel at her. The creature slipped, hissing, flailing in the spill.

Bacon fired.

BOOM. Fire engulfed her. The screech that followed wasn't human—it was the sound of something remembering it had been one.

"RUN!"

Bacon hauled Sashmon toward the museum's iron doors. They pounded on them, screaming:

"OPEN THE FUCK UP!"

A shaky voice from inside:

"I'm—I'm trying! Digital lock's glitching!"

"I don't give a shit!" Bacon roared.

Behind them—footsteps. A survivor in tattered clothes sprinted their way.

"Help m—"

Something lurched from an alley—too many arms, a mouth where its stomach should be. It snatched the man. Ripped. Blood painted the walls.

The door finally opened. They stumbled inside. Chunk collapsed, praying through gritted teeth.

The man before them—museum worker Jan Kurats. His skin greening, scales emerging. Black veins crawling up his neck.

"Thank God... survivors..." His voice shook.

Bacon backed away:

"Stay back! You... contagious?"

Jan shook his head:

"I don't know... but something's wrong..."

Sashmon, groggy, rasped:

"This place secure?"

Jan's lips trembled:

"No. The guard... he was near the Crusader exhibit... the armor... it fused with him..."

Chunk sprang up, jabbing a finger at Bacon:

"Why the fuck'd you think this was safe?! This isn't a bomb shelter, you fucking idiot!"

Bacon, still shaking from adrenaline, whirled on him:

"I'm not a fucking tactician! It's a museum—no one's ever here!" His filthy fingers raked through his hair.

Sashmon studied Kurats:

"Others alive here?"

Jan swallowed hard:

"Some staff... hid like you... I'm too scared to look..."

Sashmon nodded, scanning the hall:

"Roof's our play. Attic might be safe."

"Through the Viking exhibit," Jan pointed to an oak door. "Second floor."

Chunk checked his revolver's cylinder:

"Any weapons here?"

Jan produced a stun gun:

"Took this... when the guard... became the Crusader."

They advanced. The museum's order was fracturing—shattered displays, a decapitated statue, blood trails leading into darkness.

Jan blurted:

"Who... who do we call? Military? Government?"

Sashmon's laugh was bitter:

"Pretty sure they caused this."

The silence that followed was thicker than the smoke outside.

The museum's halls breathed shadows. Walls that once held history now absorbed horror.

They heard her first—whimpers twisting into hysterical whispers.

"Lilith... where are you? Don't look at me..."

Around the corner stood Nataly. Her skin grayed, cracking like dried clay. Her left arm elongated, bones snapping, reforming into a bony tentacle. From her back—something pulsed, a parasite eating her alive.

She saw them—and screamed.

"NO! GO AWAY! I DON'T WANT HER TO SEE ME LIKE THIS!"

Sashmon didn't hesitate.

Click. BANG.

Nataly dropped like a cut puppet. Jan squeezed his eyes shut, fingers tangling in his hair:

"God... this can't be real..."

The next hall seemed safe—mannequins in period costumes frozen in silence.

But the smell—copper, rot—gave it away.

As did the shadow moving among them. The Guardian-Crusader. Towering, clad in blackened plate mail, greatsword in hand. His head—a fleshless skull with burning red eyes.

He turned. Armor screeched.

"INTRUDERS... YOU DO NOT BELONG..."

Jan stepped forward, voice breaking:

"Wait! It's me—Kurats!"

Sashmon yanked him back:

"He's not human anymore."

The Guardian roared—and charged. Chunk couldn't dodge. The sword arced—and fell. A wet crunch. Chunk split at the waist, blood drenching the mannequins scarlet.

"NO! MAREK!" Bacon unloaded his AK.

Bullets ricocheted off the armor. Sashmon fired at joints—useless.

Jan suddenly doubled over, writhing. His skin greened faster, veins blackening, spine bending impossibly.

"What... what's happening to me...?"

Jan looked at Slavsky and Sashmon—and understood.

"RUN!" His scream shattered the silence. "I'LL DISTRACT HIM!"

He lunged forward, waving his arms wildly. "HEY, UGLY! OVER HERE!"

The Guardian turned, forgetting the others. Jan sprinted—down the stairs, into darkness.

His back rippled—something growing, writhing beneath his skin. He didn't look back. Slavsky watched as the Guardian vanished into the shadows after him.

"Fuck... fuck..." Slavsky clawed at his hair.

Sashmon shoved him: "Move! Before it comes back!"

They bolted upstairs toward the another hall.

The door slammed shut behind them like a coffin lid. Slavsky slid down the wall, gripping his AK.

"FUCK! GODDAMMIT! MAREK!" His scream echoed off the walls—hollow, useless.

Sashmon leaned against a display case, eyes scanning the cracked floor for options.

"Sorry about your friend," he said quietly but firmly, cutting through Slavsky's rage.

Slavsky bared his teeth in a feral snarl: "We grew up together. Fought together. Did time together. Now some fucking monster tears him in half!"

Sashmon rubbed his brow. "If we get out alive, we go our separate ways. But right now—we stick together."

Slavsky's eyes narrowed. "I hate cops. You bloodsuckers locked my dad up for nothing when I was 14..."

Sashmon held his gaze. "I'm sorry. Plenty of bastards wear badges."

A fragile truce.

***

Meanwhile, panting, Jan slumped against the cold display case in the deep-sea creatures hall. His breath came in ragged, wheezing gasps. The Crusader was gone, his heavy footsteps fading somewhere in the distant corridors, but inside Yan, a personal catastrophe raged.

His body was betraying him. His skin, which just hours ago had been normal and warm—the skin his wife had kissed goodbye—now itched and was breaking out in a deathly green scale. His head was splitting open, as if his brain were being scooped from his skull with a dull spoon. The pain focused in his back, between his shoulder blades, where bones ground and shifted as if something were trying to carve its way out.

A wave of nausea rose in his throat. He barely had time to bend over before his stomach violently emptied itself. He retched, choking on acidic bile, tears springing to his eyes.

“What… what’s happening to me?” he hissed, spitting out the last traces of saliva.

He fumbled for his phone. Veronica. He had to call his wife. He stabbed at the screen, but the network was dead, just like his hope. Today was Tuesday. An ordinary, boring Tuesday. They were supposed to go to the park after work, buy his son Tomasz that ice cream with chocolate chips…

The image of Grzegorz rose before him—the kind, mustachioed security guard he always exchanged jokes with, who loved talking football. He remembered how the man’s body had fused with a knight’s armor, flesh and metal intertwining into one. And Nataly… Her eyes, full of horror and a plea, before Sashmon pulled the trigger. Her daughter, Lilith, was now motherless.

Gritting his teeth, Jan pushed himself up. The world swam as if in a fever dream. In front of him was a display case—ancient jellyfish, frozen in stone. His own voice echoed in his memory: “They seem fragile, but their tentacles carry paralysis. Nature knows no mercy. It just… reshapes them.”

The irony. His right hand was deforming before his eyes. The skin had completely hardened; sharp claws had pushed out from his fingertips. In a panic, he began scratching at them with the nails of his left hand, but to no avail.

His spine cracked, twisting, and he cried out. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mixing with sweat and mucus. Despair. Fear. Pain. He stared at his clawed paw, and in that moment, he heard a rustle.

Crouched behind the model of a giant squid, pressed against the glass, was Lilith. A little girl, curled into a tight ball, shaking as she tried to stifle her sobs in her hands.

“Lilith!” Jan’s voice sounded foreign even to him. “It’s me… Jan Kurats!”

The girl flinched and looked up. Her tear-filled eyes were wide with animal terror. She didn’t see her mother’s friend—she saw a monster.

“Remember me? I’m your mom’s friend…” He tried to soften his tone, make it familiar, but something in his throat rasped.

“Mama? Where is she?! And what… what’s wrong with you?” Her gaze darted from his face to his terrifying hand.

“Mama… Nataly, she…” The words caught. How do you say it? How do you dump this horror on a child? “I’m so sorry,” he finally forced out, his voice thick with bitterness.

His body answered with a new wave of changes. His jaw seized in a spasm, his teeth sharpening. His eyes, where a flicker of consciousness still lingered, began to darken, widening, swallowing the iris. An icy chill ran down his back, while inside, a fever blazed, melting his bones. An involuntary, low growl escaped him—a sound rising from the depths of his transforming insides.

Lilith froze, paralyzed with fear. Her child’s mind refused to comprehend how a familiar face was dissolving, morphing into a nightmare. She slowly began to back away.

“Lilith, wait!” Jan instinctively stepped forward, reaching out with that same clawed paw.

The girl screamed in terror. She scrambled to her feet and fled, her footsteps vanishing into the museum's labyrinth.

“No…” Jan groaned, trying to give chase. But his body revolted. A spasm wracked his muscles. He crashed to his knees, bones cracking and reshaping themselves. The pain peaked, and then… began to dull, yielding to a foreign, cold calm. Thoughts of Veronica, Tomasz, Lilith grew hazy, distant, as if they belonged to someone else. Through the gathering fog, he caught one last glimpse of his reflection in the display case glass.

The shape of his head had changed—the skull was broader, elongated forward, stretched tight with dense, scaly skin. He couldn’t feel his face—only the bone framework and pressure where his eyes and mouth should be.

He fell to his knees, and from his throat erupted a roar that made the display case glass tremble.

And then came a new pain, sharp and rending, focused between his shoulder blades. The skin and muscles on his back bulged, stretched taut, and tore. First on the left, then on the right—from the rent flesh, two tentacle-like appendages slithered out, twisting and writhing. They were long, flexible, covered in the same green scale as the rest of his body.

The pain reached its zenith, turning into pure, blinding madness, and Jan Kurats fell unconscious.

***

Slavsky and Sashmon pressed on through the exhibit hall—shattered displays, toppled stands, glass crunching like bones underfoot. Then—movement.

Two women.

Bloated, fused into one grotesque mass, their torsos merged with a whirring mechanical abomination—gears, pistons, steaming pipes. Their faces locked in eternal agony.

"They... fused us..." one head hissed.

The mechanism shrieked to life—HOT BOLTS screaming past Sashmon's ear, embedding in the wall.

"COVER!" He dove behind a shattered display.

Slavsky crouched behind an upturned table, AK ready. "Fucking landwhales..."

Sashmon spotted the power source—a crackling generator on the creature's back.

"Hit that!" he yelled.

A plan formed instantly.

"I'll draw fire!" Sashmon rolled out, pistol blazing.

Bolts whizzed past as Slavsky aimed—BRRRT! The generator exploded, flames engulfing the monstrosity. The women screeched, bodies twisting, melting as the abomination collapsed in a heap of molten flesh and sparking metal.

Slavsky wiped sweat, panting. Sashmon checked his ammo. "Running low. Careful from here."

Slavsky nodded. "Let's move before we die."

The museum roof was an island in hell.

Slavsky leaned on the parapet, squinting through smoke rising from the streets below—fires, explosions, distant screams.

"Made it," he muttered, wiping his brow. "Now we wait for rescue."

Sashmon didn't answer. His flashlight beam swept over rusted vents, broken crates, dried bloodstains.

"You listening?" Slavsky snapped.

"Something's here," Sashmon whispered.

He approached the elevator mechanism fenced by chain links. The light caught—

A SNARL.

Two glowing red eyes flared in the dark.

"THE FUCK—?"

The creature SLAMMED into the fence, claws hooking metal, body twisting as bars bent.

Sashmon backpedaled, drawing his pistol—

Too slow.

The beast scaled the fence in seconds and LEAPED onto the roof with a bone-shaking THUD.

It was monstrous. Two razor-sharp claws sprouted from its twisted spine, joints bent at impossible angles, greenish skin pulsing with oozing sores.

But the head... The head was worst. A shattered jaw, teeth jutting in all directions. Eyes—huge, crimson, burning with madness.

Sashmon froze.

Basilisk.

Old myths flashed through his mind—a creature that kills with a glance. The beast growled, arched its back—and suddenly spat fire. Flames scorched the air, barely missing Sashmon.

The museum roof became a death arena.

The Basilisk roared, its massive frame shaking with rage. Claws screeched against concrete, leaving deep gouges. Those blood-red eyes tracked their every move.

"Why won't this fucker die?!" Slavsky emptied another magazine into its thick hide. Bullets punctured flesh, oozing black blood—but the monster only raged harder.

Sashmon aimed for its left eye—BANG!

The beast howled, covering its face—but kept coming.

"Eyes! Shoot the eyes!" Sashmon yelled.

"Great! I'm almost out!" Slavsky tossed his empty mag, slamming in his last one.

The Basilisk spat fire again.

Flames licked the concrete, nearly catching Sashmon's leg.

"Shit!"

His eyes locked on a chain near the vent shaft.

"Slavsky! Distract it!"

"WHAT?!"

"I'll loop this around its neck!"

Slavsky cursed everything under the sun—but nodded.

"Fine, fucker! But if I die—I'll haunt your ass in hell!"

He lunged sideways, screaming, firing at its eyes.

The Basilisk snarled, turning—

Sashmon leaped onto its back. The chain bit into its throat. The monster thrashed, claws scraping wildly, trying to reach him.

"Drag it to the edge!" Slavsky bellowed.

Sashmon heaved, muscles burning, boots tearing against concrete. Step by step, the beast lurched toward the roof's edge.

Out of ammo. Slavsky hurled his AK, grabbed a crowbar—and smashed it into the Basilisk's skull. CRACK. The monster shrieked—and impaled Sashmon through the chest with one claw. Blood gushed from his mouth.

Slavsky charged—

The second claw ripped his stomach open.

"AARRGH!"

White-hot agony. Blood. So much blood. But Slavsky didn't stop. Shaking hands pulled out his last Molotov. A match scraped.

"Choke on this, bastard..."

The bottle shattered against the Basilisk's head. FIRE ERUPTED. The beast convulsed, screeching, stumbling backward—

Over the edge.

The chain snapped taut. A wet CRUNCH of breaking bone. The Basilisk's body slammed onto rusted rebar below.

Slavsky crawled. A blood trail smeared behind him. He reached a storage closet, collapsed inside, slammed the door.

Darkness. Silence. Pain.

Trembling fingers found a cigarette. A lighter flickered. The tiny flame lit his face—pale, sweat-drenched, bloodied. He inhaled, coughed up blood, and grinned.

"Hell of a day, huh?"

The ember glowed in the dark. Outside, the city burned. But here, in this cramped little room—

Everything went quiet.

***

Several hours later, Jan regained consciousness, awakened by a new sensation—not pain, but a tickling, irritating impulse at the tip of his left appendage. He opened his eyes—or rather, perceived light through new, compound lenses.

A creature resembling a mangy rat had sunk its teeth into his tentacle. The reaction was instant and unconscious.
A flash of arcing energy—a blue-white burst—shot through the nerve endings of the appendage. A dry crack sounded, followed by the smell of ozone and burnt flesh. The creature flew back against the wall and fell still, charred.

Jan tried to stand up. At first, he was aware of nothing but a fundamental discomfort in every fiber of his being. His body wouldn't obey. It had been stretched, twisted, broken, and reassembled from alien parts. Bones had settled into new positions; muscles had attached to them in unfamiliar places. He toppled over, his tentacles flailing helplessly against the floor. His mind was absolute mush—logic melted; memory torn to shreds.

Who was he? Was he a virgin snail, trapped in a shell of flesh? A wandering dervish who had lost both god and path? A crappy 3D model loaded into an unprepared reality engine? He crawled toward a shattered display case. And saw his new reflection in the glass.

The man was gone. Where Jan Kurats—father, husband, museum worker—should have been, something else greened and lurked. A creature with a triangular head—a cross between a reptile and an insect. Large, bulbous, pitch-black eyes that reflected only light and fear. A wide, horizontal gash of a mouth lined with crooked, sharp teeth. Green, lumpy skin. And two flexible tentacles behind his back, carrying a lethal charge.

Memories of his past life were almost erased, smeared like chalk on a wet board. Only vague shadows remained, dreams within a dream. Veronica, the park, Tuesday—all now belonged to someone else, distant and unfamiliar. But the ability to think—coarse, primitive, as if after a devastating stroke—remained. He stared into the monster's eyes in the glass, and the monster stared back.

He gaped at the reflection for long, drawn-out minutes. Then slowly, clumsily, rose to his feet. His legs trembled.

He turned his head, feeling the new neck. Looked at his tentacles. Felt them—his new limbs. Concentrated. The tips twitched, curved. He tried to lift one—it jerked and slapped him on the back.

Then he tried to speak. His larynx, not built for speech, contorted, trying to produce something familiar.

— I... Jan.. Ku...Kurats. Kurvits. Kurets. Yad Korets..Jan. I-i-i-jan...

The sounds came out strange, guttural, wrong. The words he uttered immediately lost all meaning to him. He turned his head, stared at a plaque with text, and tried to read what was written. This skill still remained. The visual center of his brain creakily matched symbols with meaning.

— Me-du-sa. Me-du-sa, — he mumbled syllable by syllable.

He touched his head with a paw, ran it along a tentacle.

A thought, slow and heavy as a boulder, rolled down the surviving neural pathways.
Jan. Medusa. Jan. Medusa. Two concepts. Two beings. One in the past, the other in the present. They had to merge. This was the only thread connecting him to "someone."

— Jan Ku-rats. Me..medu-sa, — he muttered, testing the syllables. — Jan Kurats... Medu-u-u-sa.

A new, terrifying identity crystallized in his consciousness, replacing the lost one.
He was Jan Medusa.

Medusa moved deeper into the museum. His steps were heavy and unsteady, his tentacles twitching, looming over his head. He mumbled, spat, muttered fragments of words and phrases, trying to assemble something meaningful from them—any proof that within this alien body, something still flickered, something capable of self-awareness.

Ahead lay dark corridors. Somewhere there, Lilith was hiding. Somewhere there, the Crusader prowled. And he wandered, one of a kind, forgotten by both god and evolution, on the very edge between what was and what he was destined to become.

Nature had simply changed the form.

AFTERWORDS FROM THE AUTHOR:

When I started working on the novelization in 2018, I encountered a veritable maze of inconsistencies. The original game plot was fragmented: different versions (including adaptations by Snowball and Goblin) offered their own interpretations of events, and deleted content and early drafts only added to the confusion. How to connect the scattered pieces into a coherent whole? I went through several drafts, but the picture did not come together — until I got my hands on the original game design document, kindly provided by Adrian Chmielarz himself, the lead game designer of Gorky-17.

This document was the key. It not only described the original concept in detail (much more ambitious than the final release), but also revealed plans for an entire franchise. I was particularly intrigued by the hints of extraterrestrial intervention — the developers were inspired by «The X-Files», and I decided to develop this line of thought. In addition, the early concepts included much more complex antagonists, and Dobrovsky was originally conceived as a tragic figure, not just a “mad scientist.”

But one game wasn't enough. I looked for inspiration in other works: “Child of Men” with its sense of hopelessness, “Dog Soldiers “, with its intense action sequences, where a group of soldiers confront supernatural creatures. “District 9” with its theme of mutation and loss of humanity, even Tarkovsky's “Stalker” with its philosophical undertones. The main theme of the novelization for me became the choice: what makes us human when the line between salvation and madness is blurred? Should we change to survive, or die while remaining ourselves?

The result is not just an adaptation, but an alternative version of Gorky-17 — dark, philosophical, and, I hope, exciting.

Thank you for seeing this journey through to the end.

2025.